

Prince Consort

Baknami

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Summary

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Description:

Zidane has returned to Alexandria after his disappearance. Queen Garnet cannot seem to keep from returning to her old, dependent self when she meets him again, and Steiner is afraid that his friend will have a negative impact on his queen's sovereignty. Beatrix just wants Alexandria's restoration to go according to plan, because for as long as they've been rebuilding their fine kingdom, Alexandria is still missing its Heart.

1. Home Again

All of Alexandria celebrated when Zidane Tribal returned to Queen Garnet til Alexandros XVII. Not many were sure just who the betailed Tantalus member actually was, but they were extremely happy about him only because he made their queen happy. It wasn't much of a secret that the queen had been feeling out of sorts ever since she and Captain Adelbert Steiner returned from the Iifa tree. It had been years, and while she still led with grace and wisdom, as she promised her people during her coronation, the maids, butlers, and guards of the castle all let slip the gossip that her smiles were always forced, and none of them seemed to be real.

That all changed when an actor who was clearly *not* the traditional lead Marcus threw off his cloak suddenly in Tantalus' rendition of *I Want To Be Your Canary*. He went off script (indeed, a Trenoian critic later wrote about how they were distraught that Tantalus had ruined their favorite of Lord Avon's plays, and they nearly got whiplash from the queen barreling into them without so much as an apology!) and the play was pretty much finished by the time Queen Garnet charged up onto stage and proceeded

to punch her lover before sobbing so grossly that the nobles of Treno could do nothing but gasp (although they eventually began clapping along with the queen's best friends, if only so they didn't feel left out).

Eventually, the young genome was able to lead Garnet off of the stage (and he thanked a young boy for returning her silver pendant after she "forgot it on the floor"), and Tantalus proceeded to pick up where the genome left off. Steiner and Beatrix made it to the doors of the palace by the time Zidane and Garnet arrived, and they helped usher the couple inside and closed the doors behind them.

From there, Garnet asked how he had survived, and Zidane was his usual vague self, implying that a simple song could save him from the wrath of the Iifa Tree. Whatever had happened, the tree had tried to tear up all of its roots and therefore tear apart all of Gaia itself, until it suddenly went quiet and withered away. It would probably be several centuries before nature reclaimed its planet from the Terran machine-creature, but for now, it was dormant (dead?), and it had mysteriously become so before it could tear Queen Garnet's beloved apart.

That evening, the rest of their friends were able to meet with Queen Garnet for a wonderful dinner. The original reason behind the dinner was going to be an anniversary celebration, as well as talk about future restoration plans. Now that Zidane had returned, however, the party quickly became a welcome back dinner. The beginning of the party had Zidane becoming acquainted with Vivi's progeny, and the news of the black mage's death was by far the most somber thing that happened that day. After Quina's magnificent feast was served, however, everyone wanted to know exactly what happened after they left him at the Iifa Tree. Most of the dinner ended up being Zidane giving stories of his adventures as he tried to find his way home.

Zidane had always been naturally sociable, and he seemed most in his element when everyone began talking to him at once about the various goings on in their own parts of the world. He never even got swamped by too many people trying to talk to him all at once, and in fact he was able to give everyone the attention they needed.

However, it was Garnet who seemed to be unable to handle all of the people. She wouldn't have minded spending time with everyone and having fun with them when the plan had been to reminisce and

talk about restoration, but that was before Zidane had returned, and now that she knew he was alive, she felt a pang of possessiveness; she didn't want to share him with anyone, and she became (quite understandably) a little clingy as she held his hand during their meal. She refused to let him go, even going so far as to eat with her offhand, for she was afraid if she did release him, he would disappear, and this would all be a dream...

The festivities lasted long into the night, although there were a few that retired early. The black mages, for one, had to remind themselves that they needed their rest as they were still very young, especially considering human lifespans. Amarant, meanwhile, got bored nearly an hour into the party, and after the meal was finished and he heard enough of Zidane's "daring feats of adventure", he excused himself with the most formal curt snort he could manage before shuffling off to wherever he skulked when he wanted to be alone.

Freya, meanwhile, decided to save any information on the Burmecian Restoration Project until tomorrow, and she thanked Garnet for the hospitality before she went to spend the night at the inn. Eiko had hoped so much to be able to stay up all night and talk to Zidane, but she was still a growing

girl and she fell asleep against Cid's arm before midnight. The regent picked up his daughter in his arms, and his wife kissed their "little niece" on the forehead before the three of them all retired to their guest room.

Eventually, all that was left was Zidane and Garnet, sitting together at the grand table, with Steiner and Beatrix standing a little ways away and trying to find something else to be interested in. With the way Garnet was burying her face into her beloved's chest, the royal guards quickly realized just how much privacy they needed. Steiner was used to simply turning around and staring at a wall in order to give his queen some space, and now he had Beatrix to turn alongside him and stand with him. He took a deep breath through his nose and felt the general take his hand in hers, and from there, the four basked in each others' quiet company.

"It's still so hard to believe..." Garnet confided in Zidane, arms tightly wrapped around his waist. He kissed her head but said nothing in response. He had been cocky and self-assured all day, and now he felt she just wanted some quiet to reflect. Besides, it was a little hard to believe as well.

“I figured you’d have moved on,” he said, expressing his biggest fear. It had been years; he figured *someone* would have pressured her into marriage, but then he remembered that Steiner probably believed in his friend’s safety as much as Garnet did. Sometimes it was nice having ‘Rusty’ on his side for once. “I was afraid if I came back, you’d be conflicted.” There was nothing worse than being the “lost lover” in a relationship that had moved on. It would have ruined her, ruined them, perhaps.

But Garnet shook her head and buried her face into his cravat, soaking in his scent. “Never. Some of the dukes were unhappy when I turned away their sons as potential suitors, but I couldn’t move on. I didn’t want to, not yet.”

“You couldn’t have known I would return.”

“I asked you to promise me.”

“I couldn’t make that promise.” He knew, perhaps better than anyone, how susceptible they all were to death. Besides, the first thing she asked him was how he could possibly have avoided the reaper. It was hard to believe she had, well, believed he was still alive after all that time.

Garnet squeezed him tighter and did her best not to cry in front of him. They were alone (for given definitions of “alone”. Steiner and Beatrix never gossiped about her when she showed ‘weakness’ and acted as ghosts when she needed privacy), but she was unused to showing real, true emotion around Zidane. He was... their original adventure had been a whirlwind, come and gone in a flash, and afterwards he had disappeared for so long. She didn’t want to think of him as a stranger, but... “Does it matter? I waited. I waited, and I don’t regret a moment of it. I’d do it again, a thousand times, and I’d wait my whole life, no matter what, just to be with you again...”

Zidane let out a good-natured scoff, for he knew that couldn’t have been true. It wasn’t like she had a barren womb like Hilda (unless she did, he doubted anyone *checked*), she would have found *someone* to bear her heir after a few decades, but the thought that she would have waited that long was nice. The nail in his rib as a response to his snorting laugh wasn’t nice, however, and he tried to retreat with an apologetic chuckle. “Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh, I just... Ow! Come on, Dagger...!”

The queen had him captive. She wouldn’t let him go and she wasn’t through poking him for his

laughter. His pleas went unheard for a few moments, but soon she silently forgave him and reached out to hug him again. Then, for reasons not even she could adequately explain, she suddenly wanted to be even closer to him, so she lifted her head ever so slightly to kiss him, softly, chastely, on the side of his lips.

Zidane responded appropriately, turning his head a little so he could kiss her full on the lips, and at that point it was like turning on a switch inside the queen. Finally, after being apart for so long, all of their passion and desire came spilling forth. Their kisses came hot and fast, and it took Garnet only a minute before she slid from her seat and landed side-saddle in Zidane's lap. The two practically melted together in an inexperienced tangle of limbs and lips. Garnet had a little trouble figuring out how to appropriately make out, as she obviously had never done so before, and Zidane, while pretty skilled in the ways of pleasing women, actually found it a little hard to keep up with the queen's fervor. Not to mention there was a different concern... "How can — D-Dagger, seriously...!"

The queen whimpered, flushed and wanton, as Zidane took her arms and drew her away, and he gulped down the lump that formed in his throat at the sight of his beautiful summoner, looking so

scrumptious and enticing. He wanted so hard to continue where they had left off, but there was a slight problem... “D-Dagger, how can you be so nonchalant about this when *Your Guards* are in earshot?” It was extremely, *insanely* hard to keep anything up with the thought of *Steiner* of all people listening in. From the way the flush on Garnet’s face began to pale, she just realized this too.

“Oh— Oh, I wasn’t thinking-!” she began, practically falling out of Zidane’s lap as she tried to keep her distance and propriety. The two turned to look at the royal guardsmen, and they saw Beatrix’s shoulders heave in an attempt to keep from laughing out loud, both at the young couple’s sudden attempts at grace and at the embarrassed red her own lover’s face was turning.

Zidane bit back a playful “You could say that again,” (he didn’t want to get poked any more than was necessary, honestly) and instead he stood up and stretched, “Y, yeah, well then, I guess I’ll head over to the theater ship. Hang out with the guys for a bit...” He stopped when Garnet took his hand and squeezed it tightly, taking a step forward and looking very similar to the unsure, naive teenager he knew those few years ago.

“Don’t leave me,” she said, pleading and wistful, like a child who was afraid of sleeping alone in the dark. “I can’t... If you weren’t there with me when I woke up, I don’t know what I’d do.”

The only thing that betrayed Zidane’s reaction to Garnet’s request was his tail, which suddenly thrashed wildly; the genome’s face split into a comforting smile, “Is that so? Well, since you asked so nicely, I’d be happy to chase away your nightmares, Your Majesty.”

The room went quiet for a moment, and everyone slowly turned to face Steiner, who stiffened when he felt everyone’s eyes on him. He turned to look at Beatrix, his frown, for once, not angry but confused, “What?”

Zidane shrugged as Garnet snuggled closer to him, “We were expecting you to find a reason why it was ‘improper’ for Dagger and I to spend the night together.”

The captain turned and looked at his queen, who, for the first time in years, seemed genuinely happy to go to bed. He locked eyes with Zidane, and his scowl seemed to just barely soften. “Zidane, there are much more important things for me to worry about at this juncture. Your spending the night with

Her Majesty doesn't even register as a *blip* on Beatrix's and my schedules. I know you wouldn't hurt her. We've known each other too long for me to assume otherwise."

His scowl returned and his eyebrows furrowed, "But you already *did* hurt my lady, disappearing like you did, so much so that I was afraid she would never smile again. If you do *anything* like that again, I will personally tear you apart from the inside out."

The room dropped a few degrees in temperature after Steiner's speech, and Beatrix nudged him a bit to tell him to tone down the threats of mutilation. Luckily, Zidane laughed it off and nodded. "I promise you, Steiner, I will do whatever is in my power to keep Dagger from being lonely. She is my everything..." he turned to smile down at her misting eyes, "...and I will protect her as long as I can."

Steiner took a deep breath, his chest rising as he tried to look intimidating. Beatrix smiled and spoke up for the both of them. "Your Majesty, all we wish is for you to have a good night's rest. Goodnight, my lady."

"Goodnight, Beatrix," Garnet replied, and she tugged on Zidane's arm, perhaps a little more

forcefully than she should have. Zidane's smile turned playful as he moved to join the queen, and the two practically jogged from the room, taking only a moment to find a proper rhythm to run together and still hold hands. The moment the guards could not hear their giggling and pattering of feet, Steiner let out the most unhappy groan Beatrix had heard from him in years, and she turned to give him a face.

"Now what is it?" she practically demanded, "you were just saying you had no reservations about the two. What could possibly be making you so unhappy *now*?"

Steiner crossed his arms and let out a sigh through his nose, "It's not Zidane I'm worried about, *for once*," the captain said. He glanced at the general with a knowing look, "That is not the queen we have known these past few years."

"Yes, she is a *happy* queen," Beatrix said, crossing her own arms and furrowing her brow, "How can you be so reserved about that?"

"She is a *dependent* queen," Steiner hissed in reply, angry not at Beatrix but at the situation in general, "She has never been so attached to anyone before, and while I am happy she is not so gloomy,

she was so much more independent. She could rule without needing to rely on anyone, as a sovereign *should*.”

Beatrix couldn't believe she was even responding to this. She had thought her beloved smarter than this, but then again, this was Steiner... “You are a fool if you think anyone can survive like that. The pressure of a ruling a kingdom is stressful enough without having to keep everything locked away like an unfeeling machine. We all saw what happened to that ‘Terra’ world. Do you really want that to happen to our own queen?”

Steiner opened his mouth... and quietly shut it. He wanted to believe there was more to it than that, but... “I just am afraid she will revert to the way she was, naive, trusting, immature...” It was so easy to act the way one had been previously when interacting with old friends. The last thing he wanted was for Queen Garnet to act like an immature teenager once more. He had lived it once before and he was *not* excited about the prospect of it happening again.

Beatrix hummed thoughtfully at that, but once again she seemed unworried by the whole thing. “Zidane’s a smart lad. I have a feeling they will find

some way to keep that from happening. Besides, he can't be with Her Majesty *all* the time. The moment Queen Garnet holds court, she will be back to her old self, trust me." She paused for a moment, "Her old-new self."

Steiner's lips twitched into a smile before returning to his solemn face, and he stared wistfully at the door that his queen and her love had left. He wanted to trust in Garnet, and in Beatrix as well, but he had spent his whole life worrying about things he couldn't control, *especially* things he couldn't control, and it was really hard to *stop*. Sensing the captain's insecurity, the general reached out and took his hand again. "Come with me to bed, Bert. Everything will be much better in the morning." She then led her own beloved along, a smile gracing her features as he let out a resigned sigh.

"I really do hope you're right, Bea." Hoping was really all he could do at this juncture.

2. Morning Rush

As usual, Beatrix *was* right about things being better in the morning, and technically, also that night. The two guards had a nice, restful night in each others' arms, and Steiner had such a quiet, relaxing sleep that, for once, it was Beatrix who woke up before him. The general was dressed in her linen undergarments by the time she returned to wake her lover by tenderly tracing his jaw. He had always been a light sleeper, so even that was enough to get him to stir, and she watched him as he began stretching in the bed. "You feeling better?" she asked, a smile gracing her features as he blinked bleary eyes.

"Hmmm? Oh, I suppose I am," he murmured, still a little groggy. Beatrix was about to stand, but Steiner reached up and took her hand, and she turned back to him as he began sitting up. "How about you?...Have the nightmares subsided?"

Alexandria's general tensed, and that was all the answer that the captain needed. He looked apologetic as he drew her closer to kiss her cheek,

“I’m sorry...” He wished he could chase away her nightmares the way she did for him.

Beatrix shook her head and pulled away from the kiss, slipping her hand from Steiner’s, “There’s no point in worrying about it now. Get up; I need to strip the bedding.”

The captain sighed; he supposed she was right, and he stood up to dress himself as she began stripping the bedding for the maids. The two lapsed into silence as they worked on preparing themselves for the day. Steiner glanced across the room at Beatrix, who was slipping into a woolen tunic, “I’m going to be doing an inspection today, so I’ll be leaving the queen to you.”

“Today?” Steiner asked, scrunching his face up incredulously, “Everyone’s here today, it’s a reunion. Can’t it wait until tomorrow?”

“They’ll be expecting it tomorrow, which is why I should do it today,” she explained, searching their dresser for a cleanly pressed pair of pants. ‘That’s a big reason why your knights get all sorts of contraband items into their lockers. They know when you’ll be inspecting them and they hide everything the day of.’ She looked up at Steiner with a crunched face that mimicked his now frustrated

scowl, “I keep telling you this, and you brush it off *every* time.”

Steiner sputtered as Beatrix slipped into her tights. He ran a hand through his balding hair (prematurely balding was always a normal trait of the Steiner family; there was a reason he always wore some sort of headgear outside his room) before releasing an annoyed sigh and nodding at Beatrix. “Very well then. I’ll see you tonight?”

“Aye,” she agreed, turning to look at Steiner with a gentle smile, “Have fun with your friends. You must miss them a lot.”

The general’s smile was reflected back at her as her captain remembered the times he spent with his comrades. “True, although I have a feeling the only person I’ll be interacting with today is Lady Freya.”

“Speaking of Lady Freya, say ‘hi’ to her for me,” Beatrix said, stepping forward to kiss her lover on the cheek, “It’s been a while since the three of us had a ‘nice’ time on the lam together. I’d love to catch up with her later.”

Steiner tried not to blush at the tenderness she showed only him, and instead he did his best to put on his most serious work face. “I-I’ll tell her you’re

thinking of her,” he said as sternly as he could possibly manage.

The general burst into laughter, making the captain blush brightly despite his earlier attempts to keep from doing so, “I’ll see you tonight, Bert!” she said as she walked out of their room.

...Steiner still didn’t get what was so funny, but he was happy that she was smiling again.

When Steiner arrived at Queen Garnet’s quarters, he noted that there were two guards standing at the door. They saluted the captain, if only because Beatrix would have their hides if they didn’t, and they updated him on the goings on within the queen’s private chambers, “Captain Steiner, Her Majesty has awoken and is preparing herself for the day as we speak.”

“If I may ask...” the second guard asked, “Why are you here instead of General Beatrix?”

Steiner’s features twitched in annoyance; he and Beatrix may not have been official rivals anymore, but the female guards of the castle still hardly gave him the proper time of day. Of *course* Beatrix would

be a better fit for bringing Garnet to hold court for the day, simply because she *wasn't Steiner* . He snorted at the women (who recoiled to make sure that no phlegm flew onto them), "She is indisposed today. I am deeply sorry you will have to look at me for slightly longer than normal." That was, longer than zero seconds.

The guards looked at each other. If Beatrix was indisposed, then... "Crystal preserve..."

"An inspection," the other groaned. "Well, Tiana's doomed."

"Told her she shoulda left it at home..." The two then remembered that there was a captain of the guard staring at them, and they sneered at him for his confused blinking. "What are you looking at?"

Steiner started and turned away, turning an angry red as the girls snorted at each other. Whispers of "pervert" burned his ears, and he fought to keep from screaming at them for their rudeness to a superior officer. Luckily, before Steiner could blow his top, the door opened and out stepped Elizabeth, Garnet's cousin and lady-in-waiting, who emerged to bow before her queen. She was quite a vision herself, and with the way her hair fell past her shoulders like a straight, black waterfall, it was easy

to mistake her as Garnet herself from far away. They weren't necessarily related by blood, but the two were so similar in appearance that it was hardly a secret that her mother sent her to the castle to be the queen's body double, just in case the queen's ascension wasn't taken kindly by nobles once they learned of her true parentage. Thankfully, nothing ever came out of those fears, and she was happily living out her days tending to her cousin's clothes and being hit on by the Pluto Knights.

Everyone turned to the doorway and dropped to their knees as Queen Garnet herself then walked from her room, dressed in an outfit that would make anyone swoon. It was lightly colored and had plenty of frills, so it breathed well despite the fact that winter's chill had not been fully chased away by spring's arrival. In fact, given the season, Steiner worried that it was cut a little short and she would be in danger of catching a cold, but there was no doubt she chose it so she could show a little leg for Zidane come the end of the day. Plus, it would be easier to walk around and get to the throne room to meet with the others for their meeting. They **were** behind schedule at this point (Steiner mentally kicked himself for sleeping in, but Garnet had done so as well, so it was a moot point).

Garnet looked around at her subjects before holding out a hand, bidding them rise from their places. “Thank you, Beth, you’re dismissed.” Her cousin curtsied and moved to get some breakfast as the queen addressed her captain. “Good morning, Steiner,” she said as she fluffed out her dress slightly and approached him so gracefully that she appeared to be sailing through the air.

The queen moved to stand next to Steiner as the captain placed a hand over his heart and bowed. She curtsied in reply and walked onward, with the Pluto Knight walking two feet behind her, as was the custom for anyone under the queen, which, of course, was everyone in the kingdom. “Aye, it is a fine morning, Your Majesty. Ahh, if I may ask, but Zidane...?”

“Slipped out of the window before the sun rose,” Garnet explained as they walked together. ‘He said he wanted to meet with Ruby today, and, well, it’s going to be *quite* a boring day today, all business and no pleasure. I figure he should have some fun before we settle down for the time being.’ Steiner let out an affirmative grunt from his throat, and the two walked for a moment before Garnet spoke up again, “Pardon my asking, but why wasn’t it Beatrix who picked me up?”

Steiner set his jaw and tried not to let his annoyance be heard in his answer. “She is... indisposed,” he repeated, hissing through his teeth, as his jaw refused to open even at his command.... What a sorry state he was in if even *Garnet* ignored his assistance and asked after Beatrix instead.

...Garnet noted that he hadn’t actually opened his mouth, and she shifted to look back at him. His scowl wasn’t lost on her. “Steiner, what’s the matter?” she asked curiously.

Poor Steiner started and then sputtered when he realized that the queen had stopped everything to ask him about his foul mood. He felt just like when they were traveling together and she had begun to chastise him for butting heads with Amarant or Zidane. He couldn’t even make eye contact with Garnet at that point. “My apologies, Your Majesty. I am... unsure myself what the problem is.” He knew deep down that the queen’s question was because Beatrix was her personal bodyguard, while the Pluto Knights were generally more for protecting the citizenry rather than the castle itself... but something didn’t sit right with him, and he couldn’t just let it go. “I swear, my lady, I shan’t let it interfere with our work today.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that,” Garnet replied as flashed him a brilliant, beautiful smile that was completely devoid of any falsehood, “I just want *you* to be happy too, Steiner. I want everyone to be as happy as I am now.”

The captain could feel his heart squeeze in his chest, so hard that it was a chore simply to breathe. He wasn’t sure entirely how to respond, so he simply went with, “I don’t deserve your kindness, Your Majesty.” Garnet responded by grinning even further before she continued her walk with her guard at her heels.

It didn’t take too long for the two of them to arrive at Garnet’s throne room. It was referred to colloquially as Garnet’s because it wasn’t her mother’s throne room, the one Brahne held court in, because the last one was destroyed when Bahamut attacked Alexandria. While the guards had worked to make the castle livable, Garnet had insisted that the restoration be focused on the rest of the town, and so her throne room was, for the time, naught but the old war room, complete with a large table that could fit maps of all sizes on it. Garnet decided that

they should use it as a meeting hall instead, as there was no more need for wars.

When the two arrived and Steiner opened the door for his queen, the young royal practically slid along the floor with a giggle, taking only a few moments to cross the large room to the stage where Beatrix once announced battle strategies and orders to her army. Now, instead, there was a finely made wooden throne on the stage. It was made on short notice just a scant two days after her coronation, but Garnet accepted it as a wonderful gift from the many Alexandrians who wished her all the best as their new sovereign.

Garnet let out a soft, wistful sigh as the memories came flooding back when sitting in the chair, and she ran a hand along the delicately carved feathers in the wood. She was looking forward to making new memories, with Zidane by her side, but she would have to finish business today before she could be with him again.

Her sigh was less relieved and more annoyed as she settled on the chocobo-down cushion and beckoned for Steiner to remind her of the daily goings-on that were planned today. The captain jogged across the room (she couldn't understand

why he would wait all the way over there until she called for him like he was some sort of pariah, but his mind was almost always a mystery to her despite how simple he was) and she stretched her arms across the wooden arms of the chair and slumped in the throne like a child who didn't want to eat her vegetables. "Do you know when Uncle Cid will be arriving?" she asked as Steiner pulled out a list of the plans that he and Beatrix had prepared the day before.

Steiner cleared his throat before he read off the list. "Blutzen and Kohel have been tasked with escorting the Regent and his family to the meeting hall; they will be arriving in but a few moments." Garnet's smile turned cat-like; she knew that those two were always late for everything, much to Steiner's usual chagrin, "Whereas Breireicht has already been sent to accompany Lady Freya and Lord Fratley to meet with us. As you may already know, our first order of the day is finding ways of securing enough materials for rebuilding our three great kingdoms, and from there we shall..."

Steiner nearly jumped when someone slammed into the door to the throne room, and Kohel, Pluto Knight III, barreled into the room, skidded to a stop just inches from slamming into the table, and saluted

his superiors between his desperate gulps of air. “His Royal Highness... Regent of Lindblum...”

Steiner winced and Garnet sat up straight and hid her delighted smile behind her hands as Blutzen, Pluto Knight II, blundered into the room after his partner. The two saluted and continued once more, “His Royal Highness, Regent Cid IX of Lindblum!”

“And family,” Blutzen added quickly, nudging his partner.

“And family!!” Kohel shouted, mentally berating himself for forgetting that extra tidbit. They immediately shuffled to the side as Garnet stood and Cid stepped into the room. Hilda and Eiko would have followed behind him as appropriate, but Eiko wasn’t known for propriety and dashed out from under his cape the moment she saw Garnet’s shining face.

“Dagger!” the summoner shouted, nearly tripping over her dress (‘Please dear, *do* be careful when running on the tile!’ Hilda called) before leaping into her best friend’s arms. Garnet twirled the girl twice before setting her down and listening to the summoner’s excited squeals, “We had to wake up early today but I was so bored waiting for Father to finish getting dressed so I went playing on the

banisters and when I was sliding down one I fell off and chipped a tooth and then...!”

“You did *what!*?” Hilda cried, striding past her husband to inspect her daughter with all the fuss and bluster of a mother hen. Hilda pulled Eiko’s lips back to check her teeth, and she blinked when she found two pristine rows with nary a scratch. “Which one? Where is it?”

“Well obthiouthly ith not chibbed now!” Eiko whined until her mother released her, “I just healed it, naturally!”

Hilda let out a relieved sigh, although she clearly didn’t think it was as funny as Cid and Garnet (who were trying not to chuckle so audibly) felt it was. “W-well then, Eiko. I think Queen Garnet is going to be very busy today talking about boring adult things.” She reached out and took the princess’s hand. “Let’s go shopping in the city; we can find some gifts for your cousins and you can play with your new black mage friends.”

Eiko swished her dress back and forth, her eyes bright and shining, “Can I play in the mud with them!?”

“Absolutely not,” Hilda said with a smile, shaking her head, “besides, there are plenty of other fun things to do that don’t involve making extra work for our guests.”

Eiko harrumphed, but she turned to wave at Garnet. “Sorry you gotta do *boring* stuff Dagger.”

“I’ll survive,” the queen said with a smile as the regent’s wife and daughter moved to leave the meeting hall. Just as they exited the room, however, they heard Breireicht, Pluto Knight VI’s, voice from down the hall, and Hilda and Eiko waited for the Burmecians to arrive so Eiko could give them a greeting befitting her new status of royalty.

“It’s very nice of you to visit our queen during this time of restoration,” Breireicht said as he approached the meeting hall with the Burmecian attendees.

“Of course,” Freya said, a gentle smile on her face as she remembered the wonderful times she had with Garnet and the others on their adventure, “I wouldn’t have missed this anniversary of our journeys for the world.”

Fratley coughed, “It’s nice to be able to see Alexandria again. I’ve visited once or twice, but I

don't remember the visits myself." There were many things he *didn't* remember after that particularly nasty head wound from a stroper three years back, but his loyalty to the crown and his desire to improve his skills as a dragon knight never wavered. As the three talked among themselves, they came upon the meeting room, where Hilda was already preening her daughter so she was prepared for a proper curtsy.

"Now then, dear, just like I taught you...!" Hilda said, and Eiko stuck out her tongue like a vomiting Qu before she held her dress, dipped low, and came back up. "Very good for your first try!"

"Din't you nothith my thung?" Eiko asked, turning to face her mother with her face still screwed up in disgust.

"I used to do it myself when I first met your father," Hilda explained (prompting a chuckle from her husband) before turning to the Burmecians, who were taking the time to bow as well. "We are heading to the markets; I apologize that you cannot speak with Eiko just yet."

"We'll have time later," Freya replied, smiling at the summoner. "Find something bright, okay?"

“Nothing’s as shiny as my earring!” Eiko proclaimed happily. She turned a little and waved at Garnet before she noticed Steiner standing behind her and looking as serious as normal, “Oh!! Mister Steiner, I forgot to say; I was going to get you some gysahl pickles!”

Steiner raised his eyebrows, a little surprised, “Is that so?” He tried not to let his watering mouth become too apparent, but it wasn’t until a moment passed that he realized she mentioned she was *going* to get him some. “You decided not to?” he asked, slightly confused.

“Because you kicked me out of the castle like some *common girl* instead of realizing I’m a *beautiful princess!*” Eiko replied, taking her mother’s hand and stalking off with the smuggest look a child could possess.

Steiner, meanwhile, let his scowl return; he honestly should have seen that coming, “For the record,” he muttered, still feeling like he should defend his point, ‘I removed her from the premises because she was being a *loud* common girl, and was bothering the staff of the castle.’ And by “staff”, he meant “himself.”

“Well, we all make mistakes, don’t we, captain?” Cid asked with a chuckle. Steiner’s scowl creased further as the three Pluto Knights still in the room began giggling to each other.

“Don’t you have somewhere else to *be*!?” The captain howled, shaking a fist at the knights. All three jumped in horror before charging from the room with worried yelps as Steiner shouted after him in rage. At least he had something he could take his anger out on, for once.

Freya, meanwhile, cleared her throat loudly and coughed to get everyone’s attention, and even Steiner quieted down to allow her to continue, “I do not mean to interrupt this quite *engaging* conversation,” she began, a smile tugging at her lips as she approached the large table and looked over a map of the Mist Continent, “But I wish to go over the Burmecian Restoration Project so we’re all on the same page. Sir Fratley is here to assist me in my explanations.”

“How goes your search for Prince Puck?” Garnet asked as the second dragon knight bowed before approaching.

“No luck, I’m afraid,” Fratley said unhappily, “Lady Freya and I assumed he would be here, but it

appears we do not know his mind as well as we thought. Not to worry, however, the prince is very sly, and he has been able to survive on his own before....We just wish he knew his father's condition; His Majesty would like to see Puck one more time before..." Freya coughed, and Fratley shook his head, "But that is neither here nor there. Lady Freya, if you would?"

"Of course," she said, and together, the three leaders began their formal talk.

3. Errand Boy

Hours passed as Cid, Freya and Garnet spoke about each country's plans, stopping only once for a quick lunch delivered by Quina (they stayed in the room after the delivery, settling in a corner and munching on a perfectly seasoned berry pie). Lindblum had begun plans on a new mining operation on the Forgotten Continent, as the Aerbs Mountains that Lindblum originally were mining from had not only been mined so to the brink, but digging so deep was getting much more dangerous for many of the workers, and Cid would rather not have a cave in cause any more loss of life.

Burmecia, meanwhile, was settling on working with their dancers and geomancers, hoping to draw magic straight from the planet itself. They had been hoping to work with the dryads that lived in the area. Perhaps, once everyone worked to rebuild, they could focus on regrowing the forest that the Vube Desert now inhabited. This would come after many generations, of course, but Burmecians tended to live in the future, always attempting to find something to work for. Idle hands made for idle minds, after all.

Alexandria was working hard as well. There was always a lot of problems with population, as the cities of Alexandria and Treno tended to be so full of people that land was always hard to come by. Garnet thus had the idea to have many of Alexandria's finest and bravest (Steiner always thought that was such a *kind* way to refer to people he would usually call "degenerates") to create a new home in the Zamo Basin near Evil Forest.

"Aren't your people afraid of the Evil Forest?" Cid asked, a little worried himself for their safety. "I've heard plenty of stories about that place, and none of them inspire much relief."

Garnet, however, shook her head, "The Evil Forest has been petrified ever since we passed through those few years ago, but there are other wooded areas in Zamo Basin. We're hoping to start a logging industry down there, and bring up the wood to rebuild Alexandria as well as expand our farming in Dali." The queen smiled at both Cid and Freya. "With both of your help, perhaps we could find a way to use our resources and share them appropriately."

Freya nodded. "Burmecians care for our own, first and foremost, but I think that some of our

geomancers, given the proper incentive, could try to keep the forest at an equilibrium between growth and deforestation...”

“The wood from Zamo could be used to build our airships, which we could buy from you with parts and other such things...” Cid’s mustache twitched, which showed that he was smiling brightly. “Let us all work together for a brighter future.”

“Of course, Regent,” Freya replied as Fratley stood up to his full height and placed his hands behind his back. “Sir Fratley and I will relay the messages to King Burmecia. We’ll decide what to do from there.”

“Indeed,” Garnet agreed, feeling a great weight lifted from her shoulders. For once, she felt that she wasn’t alone in rebuilding this world, in making it even a little better than she had seen it as a princess.

The meeting seemed to be adjourned, but Steiner noted Freya’s glinting glance in his direction. She cleared her throat, and when Garnet and Cid looked up at her, she coughed and shrugged her shoulder in the captain’s direction.

Thoroughly at a loss, Steiner turned to blink in confusion at his queen, whose eyes brightened in

understanding. She turned to face Steiner, and the knight suddenly felt very cold when he noted her apologetic look, “Well, uhm, Steiner? It’s uhm, close to dinner, isn’t it?”

“Dinner close...?” Quina asked, rocking back and forth to create enough momentum to thrust themselves onto their feet, “It still two hou—”

“Yes. It’s *close* to dinner,” Garnet said, turning and pursing her lips at the Qu. Quina blinked, shrugged, and waddled out of the room with a grumble. Steiner felt even worse than before as his queen turned back to address him, “The point is, I was hoping you could pick up Zidane while we waited for dinner to be finished.”

Garnet was usually better at lying than this. Perhaps it was because Quina didn’t back her up, or perhaps it was because she forgot about needing to lie, and thus she didn’t plan for it. All Steiner knew was that when he glanced back at Freya, she suspiciously could not meet his eye, and Fratley coughed into his clawed hand.

Cid noted the suddenly awkward atmosphere and immediately went to pouring over the maps, jotting down ideas in a notepad of his for future reference when he returned home. The captain might have

once, long ago, followed her orders to the letter; Garnet was a *queen* and he was the son of a dead branch family noble. There was no way he could grasp the nuances of fine royal thinking, much less speak up against it....That was a previous Steiner, and *this* Steiner was tired of being shoved aside. “Your Majesty, I completely understand that you wish to see Zidane as soon as possible, but *surely* I can send one of the Pluto Knights out to-?”

Garnet cut him off curtly, “It would be nice, but you know Zidane so much better than your men, and I would think there is a lot for you two to catch up on.” Her tone had changed to one of royal authority, the one that Zidane always chuckled at (and probably was turned on by) and Steiner cowered under. She would not brook any further argument. “Go, Steiner. I will see you at dinner.”

Steiner’s jaw dropped. He puffed himself up for just a moment before realizing it was useless to resist, especially since it seemed *no one else* in the room wanted him there either. Was he really such a bother? He set his jaw, tried to hide the way he balled his hands into fists, and clanked from the room with an icy disposition.

He was furious. First Beatrix reminded him of his lack of ability in keeping his subordinates in line, then he was gawked at by the women in the army, and now Queen Garnet not once, but *twice*, told him implicitly *and* explicitly that she didn't want him around, mucking things up in their delicate talks. He hadn't even *said* anything, but apparently that wasn't enough either. Not even *Freya* could stand looking at him.

He passed by two Alexandrian guards, who immediately shuffled away from him, not because they were disgusted, but because the feeling of gloom and rage that surrounded him was enough to make them scared witless. The moment he passed, one whispered to the other, "Remind me again how that 'king of sunny dispositions' got General Beatrix into his bed?"

"Please, Kathy," the other replied, her grin turning feral, "The General brought *him* into hers. No one chooses a man like that for his *personality*, if you catch my meaning."

Steiner may not have heard the whispered exchange, but he *did* hear the girls giggling to each other afterwards, and it irked him even further as he approached the boat to Alexandria Town. Laudo,

Pluto Knight IV, was handling the oar as Steiner approached, and the timid writer immediately sank low and tried to look as small as possible as his captain bore down on him. “O-oh, Captain Steiner. Are you on your way to the city...?” he asked as his superior clomped onto the boat, rocking it a bit as he did.

“What does it look like, you fool!?” Steiner shouted so loudly that Laudo nearly dropped his oar. “Just get us to the other side, *pronto!*”

Laudo tried very hard not to whimper or cry as he pushed off of the dock and set them across the moat to the city, and the Pluto Knight trembled as Steiner strode from the boat and growled at the guards stationed near the gates. The women snarled back, which only made Laudo wish he had a spine like them. Alas, writing was for people with *sensitive* souls, and so he had to live with crying whenever Steiner chewed him out.

He really should have quit the Pluto Knights when he had the chance...

Steiner tromped down the Alexandrian plaza with a singular goal in mind. The captain wasn't the

brightest tool in the shed, but he knew Zidane well enough to know where he would be haunting about if he ever ended up in Alexandria.

...Twenty minutes later, after stomping into the Morning Star Bar and scaring the customers into telling him the whereabouts of a certain monkey-tailed vagabond, the knight walked back out of the bar, perplexed that Zidane hadn't once set foot in there all day. Where else could the damn child *be*?

Steiner was silent for a moment until he remembered that there was a hive of scum and villainy in the alleys near the slums. Surely Zidane would visit places like that regularly. Oh, right, his friend from Tantalus worked there too, that might be another, perhaps better, reason to check it out.

The mini-theater, which, last Steiner knew, had no real name, was just as run down and ramshackled as the last time Zidane brought the group down to visit. To be fair, most of the restoration was focused on homes and houses, and this was just a theater and bar, but it wasn't hard to tell that it was similarly run-down before Bahamut's attack, and it had been spared most of the destruction that plagued the city that night. Steiner could hear the laughter of a few people, including a couple of very familiar voices,

even before he started clomping down the stairs, and when he arrived at the bottom of them, he noted three people, two of which were laughing in one of the corners of the room. The one with the obnoxious laugh was none other than Weimar, Pluto Knight VII. He was laughing with Zidane, quite obviously, and leaning against a table that the cake-faced “actress” named Ruby was sitting on. The three were hitting it off well, with Weimar telling one of his “patented” jokes.

“And he says to the bartender, ‘that’s no Hedgehog Pie, that’s my wife’!” He burst into laughter, and Zidane crossed his arms, leaned against the wall, and chuckled, shaking his head. Ruby seemed less than amused by *that* joke, but she cracked a smile nonetheless, happy just to see that Zidane was enjoying himself.

Weimar’s laughter stopped, and a chill ran up his spine when the three heard the ominous clanking of a certain Pluto Knight Captain. A shadow was cast over the younger knight’s form, and he looked up at the glowering face that sneered down at him. “Ah. Ahaha... Captain Steiner! What brings you uhm... out here?”

Steiner took a deep breath, held it for one second, and released it. “Weimar, please tell me where you’re supposed to be from seven to nine?”

The Pluto Knight blinked from under his helmet, and he looked at Zidane, who shrugged in return, “Uhm, over in the merchant’s square, helping keep the peace. OhhhhhhhrightmaybeIshould—” Weimar was cut off when Steiner grabbed his shoulder and squeezed hard enough that the jokster flinched. Everyone looked up at the captain as he pointed up at the ceiling, towards the square.

Three. Two. One. A bell rang once, twice, thrice, and so on until finally, the seventh ring wafted into the air, and all eyes were on Weimar once more. “So uhm, I lost track of the time? I’m sorry, I’m not that late, I can just—”

Steiner crushed Weimar’s shoulder, and the Pluto Knight actually shouted in pain as the captain roared in rage. “Walk there in *thirty* minutes!? If anyone, *anyone*, is hurt from rising tensions or brigandry by the time you have arrived I will *personally* flay you *alive*. Is. That. Clear!?” He didn’t even give Weimar a chance to respond. He tossed the young man across the theater, and the knight barely had time to

hit the ground running, shouting apologies as he charged up the stairs.

Steiner growled and hissed after Weimar, feeling so *good* for being able to yell at something, but also feeling it just wasn't enough. It wasn't until Ruby let out a whistle that the captain remembered just where he was. He whirled around to apologize, but the actress beat him to it, "He always like this, Zidane?" she asked, eyeing the genome.

Zidane shrugged and stretched a bit before pushing off from the wall he was leaning against, "Sometimes, although..." he looked up at Steiner and noted the throbbing vein in the captain's temple. "Maybe we need to get some fresh air. See you around, Ruby."

"Y'all come back now, sugah!" Ruby replied as Zidane sauntered out and Steiner followed behind, sputtering all the way. "Especially since yeh'll be in Alexandria fer a long time now."

Steiner grumbled as the two walked along in the stinking alleyway. "Fresh air, you say? Somehow, I don't find this much fresher than the hole we just walked out of."

“Hoooooooookay!” Zidane proclaimed, whirling around and pointing his hands straight at the captain, “You wanna talk about this foul mood you have going on, Steiner? Because there’s ‘foul mood’, and there is *‘foul mood’*, and you hit that part ages ago and rocketed past to Terra and back. What’s going on?”

Steiner sputtered for the hundredth time that day. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Come, Queen Garnet requests your presence at dinner tonight, and we don’t want her to be kept waiting.”

“You can say that again,” Zidane said, less agreeably and more lewdly, “But come on, Steiner. I know more about you than you know, and you were never this... well, *you*. You’d think having a smoking hot girlfriend would make you calm down a bit.”

Steiner let out an exasperated groan, completely aggravated at Zidane’s lewd and irreverent behavior towards his *queen*, “I told you, there’s nothing wrong, you’re being paranoid.” Zidane clucked his tongue, absolutely certain that the way the captain was clenching both of his fists was a dead give away that he was lying, but before Zidane could call him out on it, the captain crossed his arms and snorted.

‘Why do you care, anyway?’ He practically spat, “It’s not like you ever cared about me before.”

Zidane scoffed and stopped his walk, leaning against a wall and aggravating the captain further (“We have somewhere to *be*, monkey-boy!”) The genome then gave Steiner a look that mimicked the knight’s. ‘I never cared about you before? You really want to go with that?’ the two glared at each other for a bit, Steiner with his stubborn hiss and Zidane’s tail flicking stressfully. Finally, the genome snorted and turned away, “You know, if Vivi were here, he’d...”

“*Don’t*,” Steiner said dangerously, his tone so venomous that Zidane stopped as well, and when the young man looked up at the way Steiner set his jaw and his eyes fought to remain focused, he realized what the real problem was.

The thief bit his lip and nodded, turning away. “Yeah... I wasn’t thinking when I said that, I’m sorry.” The genome stopped and let out a deep, resigned sigh of his own. “...I... I visited the village, back when I was still trying to rough it on my way back to Lindblum, but I didn’t get there in time. By the time I arrived, his grave was already there. I...” Zidane stopped, and Steiner realized,

after a half second, that the genome had *choked*. "... I was too late." The captain and young man fell into an uneasy silence, and Zidane's tail flicked a bit as he barked a laugh, "I should've been faster. If I could have seen him, even one last time, I..." He stopped when he noticed that the Pluto Knight went to a pack that he had squirreled away under his armor. After a moment of fumbling, Steiner produced a letter.

"Hmmm," he began, trying to think of how to word his next sentence, 'I was there. The day Master Vivi... stopped.' It was harder to say the actual word; he preferred the black mages' term for it, even though it was just him hiding from the truth. "Queen Garnet could not make it; she was too busy here in Alexandria, so she begged me to go." A frown appeared on his face when he remembered that: "Beatrix *ordered* it. I-I am grateful they understood, although they needn't have been so forceful about it. I suppose it helped assuage the guilt I felt for leaving the town, even for a few days."

Zidane eyed the letter in Steiner's hand as the captain got a far away look in his eyes. "He was moving so slowly. Like a..." he grimaced, like he had been forced to eat a slab of rotting meat. He didn't even bother trying to find an appropriate word

for what he was thinking, and kept going. ‘But before everything was said and done, he was still thinking of you, Crystal knows why.’ He grumbled a bit and handed the letter to the genome, the grimace taking on a pained look as he continued. “He wanted you to have this, and he entrusted it to me for its delivery. Not even the moogles could find you apparently. So take it; I should be happy to have its weight off of my shoulders.”

Figures the guy would be worried only about the “honor” of finishing a promised task rather than the pleasure of giving something that rightfully belonged to another. Zidane raised an eyebrow as he took the inconspicuous letter, and while his instincts told him to tear it open immediately... something inside him decided against it, and he slipped it under his vest and into his breast pocket. “Thanks, Steiner. And I’m sorry again, for opening up old wounds. I guess I just haven’t thought of him as... you know.” *Gone.*

Steiner shook his head. “Do not mind it. Let us just go. I would be happy to return to the castle. We should do it quickly, so Her Majesty does not look down on me more than she already does.” Zidane cocked an eyebrow as the captain began to move, and the genome instantly put two and two together.

Of *course* the reason he was so out of it was because he felt Garnet (or Beatrix, really) was angry at him. The young man padded up close to the clanking knight, and they walked in silence for a little while. It was around the time that they arrived at the square that Steiner suddenly cleared his throat. ‘Zidane...?’ he asked, his voice, for once, small for such a big mouth, “Do you think that I’m...?”

The captain was interrupted by a loud squeal, and a young girl with a basket of groceries approached Zidane with a triumphant shout, “Mister Tail!” she cried, waving the genome down happily.

“Yo Ilia,” Zidane said, dropping down on his haunches to greet the girl at eye level. “How are you today?”

“Zidane, you know this ragamuffin?” Steiner asked, perplexed. He cocked an eyebrow at the genome, who chuckled and shrugged.

“Well, we met sometimes when I wander the streets, right, Ilia? How’s your grandmother doing?” Zidane’s eyes fell on the girl’s basket, which was filled with foodstuffs, and he blinked in confusion, “Did you need to go to market on your own? No one’s been bothering you, have they?”

The girl smiled and swung her dress side to side, “No, everyone’s so busy working. I’m helping too, so we’re all working together!” She lifted the basket to show Zidane the groceries, “Grandmother can’t come to market anymore. When the big dragon caught everything on fire, some of it got in her eyes and she still can’t see anymore.”

Steiner winced; there were so many people who were hurt by Kuja’s and Bahamut’s attack on the city. He just wished he could have made it to the citizens in time. Zidane, however, was thinking about something else. “Your grandfather is rebuilding the city, and you’re buying food? What is your grandmother doing?”

Ilia frowned and an unhappy pall settled over her demeanor. “Grandma can’t work. She used to make such nice clothes, but now all of the cotton is being used to make bandages and blankets.” The genome looked over at Steiner, and the knight captain nodded.

“She speaks the truth. We have nothing to spare on idle pleasantries like new clothing.” And Garnet already donated most of her wardrobe to sopping up wounds and dressing the peasantry. It broke

Steiner's heart almost as much as it made it soar that she was *his* sovereign.

Zidane frowned, scratching at his rear thoughtfully (Steiner sighed inwardly at the rogue's, well... *roguishness*), "Hmmm... well, everyone should find some way to work, and I'm sure she's not feeling okay with sitting around being taken care of. Just sit tight, okay? I'll find something she can do tomorrow."

Ilia looked at Zidane with bright eyes, ever reverent of the genome, "Thank you, Mister Tail! Thank you for coming back; I saw you from the roof during the play yesterday; Queen Garnet was so happy to see you! Thank you for making her smile again!" Zidane, for once, was caught off guard by her devoted announcement, and she peered at him with her loving smile, "Will you stay with us in Alexandria? Will you become Queen Garnet's *beloved*?"

Zidane tried to keep from reacting so surprised to her question, but thankfully, it was Steiner who coughed loudly enough that the genome laughed and flicked his tail in delight. "Well, who knows? I mean, I'd like to stay for a while, if Dag— if the queen'll have me."

Ilia rocked on her heels, her smile widening profusely. “I saw the way she hugged you. She wants to *marry* you, I bet! She even had one of her guards be your bodyguard to protect you!”

Ilia smiled up at Steiner, who sputtered in rage. How was it that he had been working for the people of Alexandria for nearly two decades, and they *still* saw him as little more than a *bodyguard* for people who by all respects should be working under *him*! He trembled and took a step forward, ready to verbally berate the small child, but suddenly Zidane, who noticed the tense mood in the air, burst into laughter, and caused both Ilia and Steiner to blink at him in confusion. “Oh no, Ilia! You got it all wrong! Steiner here’s not my bodyguard, he’s my friend!”

Steiner started, completely caught off guard at the genome’s announcement, and he went very quiet as Zidane continued, “I bet you have somewhere to be though, don’t you? Go take that home and say ‘hi’ to your grandmother for me, okay?”

Ilia nodded and waved as she started off. “Okay! Goodbye Mister Tail! I’ll see you tomorrow!” Zidane stood back up (and stretched a bit to work out the kinks in his legs) and waved the child off as Steiner stood, completely silent.

“I meant it, you know,” Zidane said, shrugging at the captain as Steiner blinked at him. ‘About you being my friend. You’re not the best person to hang out with all the time, but you try, and honestly, that’s enough for me, Beatrix, and Dagger.’ The genome rolled his shoulders as Steiner considered this point, “So don’t put yourself down so much, okay? I don’t think your blood pressure could take it.” There was nothing else that needed to be said, and the thief turned on his heel and practically bounced off towards the castle. “Come on, let’s not keep her waiting, yeah?”

It took a moment for Zidane to hear the captain clank up beside him, “Indeed, hmm...” he coughed into his gauntlet as they walked together before he worked up the ability to say “thank you for that, Zidane.”

The genome’s smile threatened to crack his face in two.

4. Dilemma

As Zidane and Steiner made their way to the castle, the two of them encountered Eiko and Hilda, who had finished their shopping and were also on their way back to the castle. The princess rushed up to them with a shout, Zidane dropped down before she bull-rushed and bowled him over, and the two of them embraced for a moment before Eiko pulled back. “Zidane, Vivi’s children are so much fun to play with! I’m so jealous, they can go anywhere they want without anyone watching them, but Mother has to make sure I don’t ‘get into trouble’.”

“That’s just how it is with princesses and nobles,” Zidane replied with a good-natured shrug. She couldn’t have assumed that being royalty would be all fun and games, seeing as how Garnet was her friend. The young man stood and stretched a bit, adding offhandedly, “If you want, I’m sure I can take you out for a day or two though. Give Hilda a chance to herself.”

The queen regent noted Eiko’s starry-eyed expression, “It could be like a *date!*” she crowed,

and Zidane chuckled as the four walked together towards the castle.

“A playdate, yes,” Hilda replied, reminding Eiko of the proper wording for such a phrase, “I shall discuss it with your father tonight.”

Eiko let out a joyous squeal and charged for the gondola that would take them to the castle. When Laudo noticed her rushing headlong towards him, the Pluto Knight let out a scream and cowered as the princess leaped into the boat and rocked it a bit just to get a reaction out of him. Laudo continued to cower, clutching his oar, as the others approached, and Steiner immediately set to chewing him out, as usual. “Laudo, get up! You’re making the Pluto Knights look bad!” the captain ordered, and Pluto Knight IV let out a whimper before standing very, very slowly.

“U-understood, I c-can take y-you to the o-other side...” he whined. Eiko and Zidane chuckled at each other for their *ingenious* prank and Steiner rolled his eyes. The gondola itself was fairly cramped for four and one Pluto Knight, but with the men standing while the women each took a seat, it didn’t end up too bad.

Contrary to Laudo's fears, thankfully, the boat didn't sink, and he gave a prayer of thanks as Eiko shot out of the boat and zoomed towards the castle. It appeared that Cid was there to meet them, and he was happy to have his daughter fly into his arms as Hilda, Zidane and Steiner followed behind.

"Ah, Zidane," Cid said amiably as he lifted up and bounced his daughter a bit, "Queen Garnet said you were about town. I take it Alexandria is doing well?"

"As well as it can be," the genome replied with a shrug, "The people are working hard, but there's only so much you can repair in two years' time, you know?" Despite all of it, the gears were already turning in the young man's mind. It wasn't like Garnet or Beatrix weren't doing their hardest, but it seemed like there was a long way to go before the city was back to some semblance of normalcy.

Steiner coughed, "Please excuse me, Regent, but Queen Garnet expressly asked for Zidane's company, and I must get him to her as soon as possible."

Cid chuckled, which caused the captain to purse his lips. "Ever the straight lace, aren't you, captain?"

Well, I shan't keep you. I shall see you at dinner, once we've settled down and freshened up."

Zidane gave Cid a sneaky apologetic look, and he waved at Eiko before he and Steiner continued on towards the castle. Overall, the place was rebuilt only so far as to make it livable, as the genome recalled hearing that Garnet had ordered the workers to focus on the restoration of the city. That appeared to be why a lot of the stone masonry had just been shoved out of the general walkways, and the ceilings were merely boarded up rather than actually repaired. Given how much work had to go into Alexandria even now, it would probably be several more years before the castle returned to its full glory....Zidane still wasn't entirely sure where he saw himself in that time. He wanted to believe that he would still be welcomed in Alexandria... but he had learned a long time ago not to take anything for granted.

"Is everything alright?" Steiner asked, snapping Zidane from his reverie. The young man turned to glance at the captain, and they climbed the stairs together as Steiner continued. "You're usually a lot louder than this."

Zidane guffawed, “Pot, meet Kettle!” he crowed, “You’re the one who’s mouth is at least twice as big as mine!”

Steiner coughed, his scowl returning. He muttered something under his breath, looking put upon, and the genome chuckled a bit before jogging along towards the royal chambers. He didn’t have to go far, thankfully, as Garnet was standing out on the balcony and speaking with Freya. Zidane jogged up the stairs to get a better look at Garnet’s knee length spring dress, and he slid next to her to take in the sights. “Holy crap your legs go on forever,” the young man breathed, his tail flicking excitedly. Garnet barely regarded him, finding that if she reacted too much, it would only encourage him to continue, and instead, Freya only glanced at him from under her helmet. When her eyes flicked up, her fight-or-flight senses kicked in when she saw Steiner’s angry, hurt face.

The Burmecian shook off the cold feeling of someone walking over her grave, and she turned instead to the queen, “Well then, I shall see you later, Your Majesty. Fratley and I must continue searching for Prince Puck. Please consider the king’s request. I understand it might be... difficult, but our

people desire closure, and there is no other way to do so.”

Garnet bit at her thumb, her frown apparent and her eyebrows knit in deep concentration. “I will... consider it, at the very least. I can only imagine how the Burmecians must be feeling. I would hope that *you* understand, at least, why this isn’t an easy decision to make.”

“Of course. You know that I will accept any decision you come to. You will always have a friend in me, Dagger.” She gave her friend a soft smile before bowing and turning to leave the castle. Steiner’s stone-faced glare was much more cutting as she passed by, and the dragon knight’s pace quickened as she bound down the stairs two at a time, as if running from the group.

Zidane wasn’t an idiot and picked up on his friends’ icy dispositions, but before he could even consider what the reasons behind them were, he felt Garnet place a hand on his shoulder, and he decided there was something much more important to focus on: the hot, sexy lady at his side. “How was your day?” the queen asked as he turned to smile at her. His reply was simply taking her free hand in his, kissing it with a devilish smirk.

“It was nice to visit Ruby, but not nearly as nice as seeing you again,” he said, pulling her closer. Garnet didn’t push him away, but the two melted together in a deep, easy kiss. Garnet’s arms wrapped around Zidane’s neck and hung there languidly as Zidane held her close and squeezed her tight.

Steiner released a hacking cough to remind everyone of his presence. He might have been used to being invisible when Garnet needed to be alone, but he had no problem with getting under Zidane’s skin. The genome in question groaned loudly when he pulled away, and he tried to ignore the queen’s chuckling at her lover’s red face, both from anger and arousal. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you!?” he insisted, turning to glare balefully at the Pluto Knight.

Garnet burst into laughter when her captain shrugged in response. “That is a distinct possibility, but she *did* tell me that it’s almost dinnertime, and I wish for her only to eat on time.”

Zidane snorted, “You can say that again...” he muttered, and Garnet giggled, perhaps for an entirely different reason than the genome’s joke. She reached out and took his hand with a smile, “Come

on, there will be time for that later. Steiner's right, the others are waiting for us."

Well, they were waiting for *her* , but Zidane supposed Eiko still wanted to talk to him. He couldn't just ignore everyone else. The queen tugged a bit on his hand, leading him down the stairs towards the dining room.

The rest of the guests were waiting, and Garnet was right: there was time, there would always be time later.

Dinner was a cordial affair, although the amount of people had been reduced drastically since yesterday. The Regent and his family spent their dinner with Garnet and Zidane, but unfortunately the Lindblumians had to be on their way back in the morning. Eiko was distraught when she heard that they were leaving so soon. "It's not fair...! Zidane and I were going to go on a date!" she practically whined.

"A playdate," Hilda made sure to correct, "and nothing had been set in stone, Eiko dear. Your father has to return to Lindblum and start the restoration

plans. The faster Lindblum is up and running, the faster we will have a little more freedom.”

Eiko went quiet, trying not to pout, and Zidane leaned forward to smile at the regent’s daughter. “Hey now, Eiko, you know I’m not all that busy myself. I’m not a king or anything, so I’ll visit you the moment I’m not too busy, okay?” He didn’t mention that ‘being busy’ meant “keeping Garnet company”, but the way Cid snorted a bit showed that the other adults were on essentially the same page.

Regardless of Zidane’s original intentions, his offer was able to placate the young royal enough to calm her down, and dinner went on without a hitch. It was a quiet, mundane conversation, interrupted only once or twice by Quina coming in to collect used plates and add their own two cents to whatever was being brought up.

In fact, the time after dinner was just as mundane and lighthearted as their dinner. It was the last day the Fabools could stay in Alexandria, so Zidane and Eiko made the most of it by clambering about the palace, with Hilda watching serenely from a little ways away (just to make sure Eiko didn’t get hurt in ways she couldn’t heal). Garnet ended up retiring in the library with Cid, and the two spent most of the

evening considering what little surviving texts there were on the Summoner Tribe. It wasn't hard to notice that the queen was still very interested in her people, and what the future might hold for them now that they were down to only two.

Steiner, meanwhile, would have been alone afterwards, but as he moved to make his usual rounds near the castle, he felt a familiar arm wrap around his, and he turned only slightly to smile at Beatrix's smug face. "Is this arm taken, sir knight?"

The captain let out one laughing cough as the two easily fell into a comfortable stride together, and he shook his head as he continued the teasing, "Of course not, fair lady. This arm is only for you, after all." Beatrix's chuckle lasted for a moment as they walked. It was the same patrol route they both knew very well, so it wasn't that they were taking time off. They just so happened to be manning their patrol at the same time...of course.

A quiet moment passed between the two of them as they walked, until Beatrix let out another chuckle as a memory came to her. "I'm sorry it took so long, Bert. There was a lot more contraband than I was expecting. I was beginning to run out of horrible things for them to clean. I finally settled on having

them clean out your knights' quarters." Steiner stared at his lover incredulously when she turned to smile slyly at him, "They're going to be so angry about having to clean up after such slobs that they're going to be especially hard on them. I'm expecting a lot of your own unit to be brought forward when my unit finds stuff that your men were trying to hide. I'd look into what punishment you're going to give them tomorrow."

Steiner snorted, "I might just pound them into paste," he growled, his foul mood not entirely gone. Beatrix picked up on it immediately and cocked an eyebrow at the way the captain clenched his fists.

Beatrix's eye watched his balled-up fists, and she pursed her lips, a pitying smile on her face, "Care to explain why you're sulking so much, Bert?"

The captain twitched, and he self-consciously stretched his fingers out as the two of them slowly walked the castle grounds together. "...Zidane noticed it too. Am I really that easy to read?"

"Dear, you're like a damn book, I'm sorry to say. Queen Garnet is just too kind to point it out all the time." She almost mentioned that she had told him this many times before, but when she heard his exasperated sigh, she bit back her remark, and spoke

up about something else, "...Bert... If you want to talk about something, I'm here for you. You know that."

Steiner clenched his hands, released his balled-up fists, and looked away. Her patronizing pandering wasn't very helpful, especially since she was being hypocritical. She would implore him to talk about his problems, insisting that he was being "like other men" who couldn't talk about their feelings, but the moment he implied that she should talk to him about the problems *she* faced, she suddenly became just as tight-lipped as he was at that moment. "There's no point in worrying about it now," he muttered, mimicking her words to him that morning. The way Beatrix faltered in her step showed that his pointed remark's ulterior meaning was not lost on her.

The mood was broken, and Beatrix pulled away from her lover, crossing her own arms in thought as she looked away from him as well. The two had stopped their walk in front of the castle moat, and the two looked out at the lights of their beloved city.

They did not speak a word to each other the rest of the night.

Night fell over the city of Alexandria, and when the Fabool family went to go to sleep, Zidane and Garnet quickly moved together to retire for the evening. Their little “trysts” were hardly hidden, and they knew that soon gossip would spread like wildfire through the entire city. Heck, the peasants who had interacted with Zidane before already knew him, so it was only a matter of time before the news worked its way up into every facet of the citizenry.

Zidane had already settled into the queen’s bedroom as if it were his own, although that was probably just because he was Zidane, to be honest. The genome settled on Garnet’s bed, his tail flicking lazily as he watched the queen brush her hair out. She was sitting at her vanity and watching him from the mirror, and their eyes met through the glass, allowing them to share a quiet moment together, without worrying about politics, or sex... the latter was especially hard on Garnet. She knew that it would happen eventually, but she was so used to not having to think about it. However, that night when she had asked if Zidane could get out of those dirty clothes and take a bath for once in his life, he immediately made a snarky comment about her wanting him to take off all of his clothes, and she

stopped bothering to ask him to do *anything* for fear he would find some way to twist it into an innuendo.

...She slowed the brushing of her hair, and Zidane, strangely enough, was the one who spoke up first, breaking the quiet tension in the air. “So I actually had a question, if you’re not busy.”

“Is that a jab?” Garnet asked, a smile gracing her features as she watched him sit up, “Is everything okay, Zidane?”

“Everything’s fine with me, but I was talking with Steiner, and he was worried you were angry with him.” Garnet stopped mid-brush, and Zidane looked up, his eyebrow quirked, “Wait, *are* you mad at him?”

The queen sighed. “Of course not,” she replied, although her countenance was a little guilty. She paused for a moment, and a mischievous smile appeared on her face as she placed her brush on the vanity, “No more than I usually am, mind you.”

Zidane chuckled a bit, but he stood up and moved to wrap his arms around Garnet’s shoulders (“Zidane please, you’re icky and dusty...!” she tried to implore), “So what’s the problem then? He was pretty distraught about the whole thing, and I mean,

I'm not worried about him so much, but if we have to live in the same castle as him, then we might as well make sure he's not screeching all the time, you know?"

Garnet let out a small, thoughtful hum in agreement, but she looked him in the eye through the mirror with a very apparent frown on her face, "I don't... Zidane, I don't know what to do... the Burmecians are so angry... Freya and Fratley said that so many people are demanding retribution..."

Zidane placed his chin on his arm. He had an inkling about where this was going. "Haven't you and Beatrix discharged the soldiers who were being assholes during Alexandria's occupation of Lindblum? You guys have been doing everything to show that war isn't what's on your mind."

"That's true, but that's not what the Burmecians are angry about." She placed the brush on the vanity and looked up at Zidane, directly in his eyes, "You said it yourself, Beatrix hasn't been discharged. Mother's dead, and to many people, she is the last person who has not answered for her crimes."

Zidane didn't say a word, but he looked into her eyes and noted the wetness that shimmered... He couldn't find any words, but he immediately began

putting the pieces together in his mind. "...Ah." Was all he could get out. "...Does Beatrix know?"

"She does. I told her the moment the letter arrived first asking me to turn her over to their courts." Garnet shook her head, "I'm certain if I did, they'd parade her about; it would be a show trial. I can't send her off... they would *kill* her."

Zidane didn't say anything about that, but instead leaned further on her chair. He sensed there was something more to this than just that, as it wouldn't be a problem to just say "no". Freya even said that she would help Garnet no matter what decision she reached, so... "Wait... does *Beatrix* want to go through with it?"

That's when the silence became deafening. Garnet dropped her head and she clasped her hands together. "...She left the decision up to me," the queen began after a moment to choose the right words, "...But ever since she heard the news, it's like she's become a dead woman walking, awaiting her sentence. Perhaps, either she thinks that I will do so, or she feels that it's the right thing to do."

Zidane pushed off and began to pace. So that's what was going on. "So you're trying to spare Steiner's feelings by not telling him." All of them

knew how he would react if he got the news. He was a protective person by nature, and he believed in Beatrix's honor above all. He would do whatever it took to keep her out of harm's way.

"If I... If Beatrix and I decided to go through with this, however, he would be distraught. He wouldn't know what to do." He would have to choose between protecting the honor of his kingdom or his beloved. "Beatr— we just don't want him to be hurt..."

"Sorry to mention," Zidane muttered, turning to face Garnet with a serious frown, 'But he's already hurting. You're keeping all of this from him. He's an adult, and older than all of us. He's been through just as much as any of us; he can handle knowing the truth of the matter. The fact that you're not giving him any credit is probably what hurts him the most.' Garnet looked up at Zidane, her eyes still misty as she realized the problems she and Beatrix had created for the person they were trying to spare. "Tell him, Dagger. He of all people deserves to know, and it should be by *you*." If Zidane told the captain, it would just prove that Garnet didn't trust in him enough to bother to do so.

The queen opened her mouth, and she dropped her head down once again, suddenly finding her fingers a lot more interesting. “You’re right. I-I hadn’t quite considered that point.” To be honest, it was Beatrix who asked not to let Steiner hear about it, but now Garnet was realizing why that might have been a mistake. “I should speak to him tomorrow. I have no doubt that you’re going to be busy again in the daytime. Is Tantalus still here?”

“Nah, Baku bitched me out and told me that they were done babysitting me.” Zidane shrugged at this revelation, his smile widening just a bit, “To be fair, they had to take a week to nurse me back to health. I’m sure they were all glad to be rid of me. Besides, I wanted to meet up with someone else tomorrow. You think I can borrow some cotton? Well, not *borrow*, per se.”

Garnet stood up from the vanity, moving to settle on her bed. She was not surprised *at all* when she felt the genome tackle her from behind and nuzzle her neck. She tried not to laugh out loud at the tickling sensation when she felt his soft stubble on her skin, “What could you possibly need cotton for, you little monkey?”

Zidane drew her into his embrace and drew her into his lap after sitting down on the mattress, “I’ve been hearing that someone in the city’s not able to do too much manual labor, but she’s a wiz with the spinning wheel. I bet she could spin some nice thread even with her eyes closed, so to speak.” The genome smirked when he saw the queen’s quizzical look before he finished his thought, “So if I could get some unspun cotton to her place, I’m sure she could do some work, and the tailors can spend their time actually weaving instead of spinning, you know?”

Garnet took some time to process this before nodding. “That sounds okay. I’ll write up a letter of recommendation for a couple of basketfuls. Why don’t you take one of the Pluto Knights with you? What was his name, Haagen? He’s a hard worker...”

Zidane wracked his brain to remember that one. Number VIII, was it? He was the one who tried to tear the genome apart back before the whole kidnapping mess started. Well, trying to beat the crap out of a kidnapping thief could be seen as “hard working”. “Sounds like a plan. Now then, where were we...?”

“Zidane *no*, you’re icky and dirty and I’m putting my foot *down!*” Garnet giggled, pushing him onto the mattress before hopping up herself. “Either you scrub yourself down or you’re sleeping on the couch! I can’t have myself getting caked in dust every time I wake up!”

“Aww, but that’s the best part about waking up...” Zidane chuckled playfully, bouncing from the bed and jogging to her bathroom.

Garnet let out a gentle laugh as she watched him go, tossing off his vest as he did. She reached down to beat it outside of the window and hopefully get some of the dirt off, but she noticed a letter in his breast pocket. Curiously, she pulled the letter out and read off the name. “It’s from Vivi...?” she questioned, flipping it over to glance at the unbroken seal. “...When did he get this...?”

She placed the letter on the end table and moved to beat out the vest outside of the window. It was the least she could do now that he actually listened to her....For once.

The queen giggled when she heard a few wet footprints approach her, and she turned softly to smile at the watery genome. “I uh, I wasn’t gunna

draw the water for a bath so I just did a sponge bath. Sswhat I'm used to and all."

Garnet was about to ask if he even knew how to settle down and relax, but she supposed those two were diametrically opposed, at least to Zidane. Besides, he was already kissing her; she nearly melted under his touch, as by the time he pulled back, she noticed her legs had given out and she was being supported by a smirking monkey. She slapped at him with a laugh and twisted out of his grasp, tossing his vest at him as she spoke, "Well, at least you're not all grainy. How can you live like that?"

"You get used to it, I..." Zidane looked at his vest's pocket, and his eyes widened for the briefest of moments before he let out a breath of relief when he found Vivi's letter. "Oh thank goodness, I thought I had lost it when I was climbing the rampart with Eiko."

"No wonder I heard Lady Hilda screaming from the library," Garnet chuckled, settling near the head of the bed while Zidane settled himself on the side and tore open the letter.

The queen watched as Zidane, still clothed in nothing but a towel, began to read over the letter. He pursed his lips, but he couldn't stop his bottom one

from quivering. Garnet immediately moved forward, reaching out and wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

I always talked about you, Zidane. How you were a very important person to us, because you taught us all how important life is.

Garnet read the letter over Zidane's shoulder, and she placed her hand over her mouth. She barely noticed the genome's heaving shoulders as he fought back the tears.

Why I was born... How I wanted to live... Thanks for giving me time to think.

The tears wouldn't stop, and they flowed freely down both Garnet's and Zidane's cheeks. The queen squeezed her lover tighter, and together in each others' arms, they mourned their best friend as silently as they could manage.

My memories will be part of the sky...

5. Groundwork

The next morning came early for the Alexandrian residents. Zidane awoke with the dawn, and he got to watch Garnet's beautiful sleeping form as she drooled on the pillow. *She drools. I can't handle how cute she is*, the genome thought to himself. It was around that time that he realized that he was still nearly naked, and while he wouldn't mind it so much when he was back with Tantalus, he was trying to at least *pretend* that he was a gentleman, and Garnet was, well, she was adorable and cute, but he was quickly learning just how much she didn't appreciate his jokes.

He moved slightly, sliding out from under the covers and practically falling out of bed in an attempt to keep the queen from waking up. He really hoped that Garnet appreciated how much of a goddamn gentleman he was being because hooooly crap.

Zidane grumbled to himself as he put on his trousers, and by the time he got his vest on, he snorted a bit as Garnet stirred and actually *whined*. She was probably missing the genome's warmth, as

he noticed she reached out for the pillow he had just left. He was about to croon at her adorable behavior, but she grabbed at the pillow and gasped, “Zidane? Zidane!?” she cried, suddenly frantic.

Zidane jumped to her side when she pulled at the sheets to look for him, “Hey there, hey,” he said, reaching out to kiss her temple. Garnet gasped, whirling around on the bed, stopping only when she came face to face with the genome. She reached out for him with a whimper, her eyes wet from unshed tears, “Oh Zidane, you don’t know how much I love seeing you here...” She reached out and drew him down to kiss him softly. “I had the worst nightmare. I woke up, and you weren’t there. Not *here* . I can’t, oh Zidane, don’t leave me...”

“Shhh, Dagger, I’m not going anywhere,” the young man replied, dropping down on one knee to look her in the eye, “I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you. I’m sorry you went through all of this alone. I’m here as long as you need me, okay?”

The queen reached out and took his cheeks, her fingers trembling. Zidane replied with a chuckle, taking her hands in his. “Hey hey, come on, let’s get you dressed and ready, and we’ll go see Cid and

Eiko and we're going to have a wonderful day, okay?"

Garnet nodded, her breathing evening out. She nodded quietly as Zidane stroked her fingers, and only then did she release him. The genome stood up as his lover sat in her bed, and she stared straight ahead, her brow furrowed in thought. Before all of that, the genome was about to go wandering the castle, but now he figured he should stay with her a little longer...

Zidane nearly jumped when he heard someone knock on Garnet's door, and before the genome could ask who it was, a woman opened the door, and in stepped Garnet, dressed in a warm petticoat and... "Wait, Dagger!?" Zidane whirled to look at Garnet in the bed just before turning to blink at the Garnet in the doorway.

"Morning, Beth..." Garnet said, her smile returning at Zidane's adorably amusing reaction, "Sorry, I'm a little behind in my schedule."

"You were behind yesterday, too," 'Beth' said, crossing the room and brushing past Zidane to check if the queen had a fever, "Are you sure you're okay? You're not ill, are you?"

“Ooooooooookay, who in the world is— Beth?” Zidane asked, gesturing to Garnet’s clone, “She uh...”

“...Is my cousin, Elizabeth,” Garnet replied, smiling up at her lover, “She just looks very similar to me, as you can already tell. She’s my lady-in-waiting, so I hope you two will get along well.”

“Your Majesty, we really must be preparing for the day. Lady Beatrix will be here any moment,” Elizabeth said, glancing dismissively at Zidane before turning back to her queen. “Please tell your boy-toy that he needs to leave.”

Garnet was about to reprimand her lady-in-waiting for calling him such a rude nickname, but Zidane chuckled and shrugged, “You two girls have your girl time. I’ll go see if Eiko’s wandering around, or I can harass Steiner a bit.” He waved a bit as Garnet nodded at him, and he was out the door. He stretched a bit, shook his tail out, and once again the castle was his oyster.

It took a moment for Zidane to decide what to do; he figured he should at least wait for Eiko’s departure before he headed out to help Ilia. Not to mention there was Garnet’s episode that morning. He knew that she missed him a lot, Steiner in

particular wouldn't shut up about it, but it was the first time that he had seen her react so. Should he even leave the castle? He wondered a bit as he skipped down the stairs towards the barracks: if Garnet needed him here, then he wouldn't mind keeping her company for a bit....But on the other hand, what if she needed him around all the time? Would she be that clingy for years if he enabled it?...Would it even be a problem to stay with her in this drafty, broken-down castle for the next six or seven decades?

...Ah, finally! The genome found Steiner, and he could stop worrying about the future and instead focus on the present: that was, pestering his best knightly pal. "Yo, Steiner!" he called, swaggering up to the captain before sliding next to him as easily as breathing. The man glanced at the genome, and Zidane coughed loudly. 'Holy *hell* your face.' The somber scowl and dark rings under the captain's eyes proved that he didn't get *an ounce* of sleep last night. "Steiner, bud, you doing okay? What the hell happened last night, Beatrix not put out?"

Steiner pinched the bridge of his nose with an ugly, creaking clank of his armor. "Zidane, just leave me alone, I don't have the energy to deal with your 'jokes' today." Now *that* scared the genome more

than anything: Steiner didn't even have the energy to snap at him angrily. Something was definitely wrong.

“Yo, Steiner, you know that you can't keep this up, right?” Zidane put on his most serious face and slid in front of the ‘zombified’ Pluto Knight. “This isn't healthy, you'll wear yourself down if you keep acting like this.” Jeez, he didn't think that his friends were *this* broken ever since he left. You'd think they'd learn how to take care of themselves while he was gone, but this was why they couldn't have nice things.

Steiner let out a deep sigh and turned away, “I meant it, Zidane. I'm going to be working with the other knights today; I'm going to be busy, something *you* certainly wouldn't know about.” Zidane rolled his eyes as the captain turned away and moved to clank off, “I'm sure you'll be wanted with the regent and his family. The least you could do is *pretend* you're a part of the family.”

Zidane opened his mouth for a smart remark, but he stopped when he realized Steiner was asking him to be part of the “family”....A cocky smirk appeared on the side of his lips. Heh, the big lug *was* getting comfortable with the fact that he'd be here for a

while. Zidane just hoped the rest of the castle, “Beth” included, would be as amiable in a month or two.

Nevertheless, he decided that he could give Steiner a wide berth as he turned and moved towards the guest wing. The genome had a sneaking suspicion that Garnet would round Steiner up later and help set his mind at ease. Hopefully then the captain would be less of a hardass. Either way, Zidane wanted to meet up with Eiko before the regent left for Lindblum, and he couldn’t let Steiner’s mood bring him down.

It wasn’t hard for him to brighten up when he encountered the girl he was looking for; Eiko was a bundle of energy even in the early morning, probably because even Hilda couldn’t bother being properly dressed at such an early time, and this was the only time the princess could be on her own without being watched over by someone. Thus she made sure to utilize her free time to its fullest extent the moment Zidane came into her view. “Zidane! Wanna play ‘Hide and Seek’? Last night Mother wouldn’t let us hide in the nooks and crannies of the castle, so it’ll be perfect now!”

Hilda had expressly forbade it because she wasn't sure what venomous creatures might be living in those crevices, and Zidane shrugged, not entirely sure if the woman's fears were founded or not. "Why don't we have a wrestling match instead? Oh, or, we could go hunt down Mullenkedheim in the kitchen. First to get him to run screaming from the dining room wins." It'd keep Eiko busy *and* help Quina from getting exasperated. Two birds with one stone.

Thankfully, the princess didn't notice the ploy, and her impish nature came to light when her smile turned sinister. "Ohhh, this time I'm going to beat you, Zidane!" she called as she rushed off, "ThreeTwoOneStart!"

Zidane chuckled and jogged unhurriedly after her, "Come on now, that's cheating," he called lackadaisically.

"All's fair in *love* and war!" Eiko shouted back.

...Well, she had a point there...

Incidentally, it was Eiko who won the "game", leaping out of the rafters with a rope tied around her

waist so she could bungee in front of the Pluto Knight with an unearthly scream. Quina found it especially delightful the way Mullenkedheim ran horrified from the room, but then shooed Eiko off of the rope, licked it, and charged up to the rafters to find the exceptional mushrooms that were growing up there. The moment they left was the moment that Garnet walked in (or was it Beth? Zidane was really creeped out now that he knew his girlfriend had a freaking clone wandering the castle) with Cid and Hilda conversing merrily with each other.

“Your hospitality has been absolutely superb, Queen Garnet,” Hilda said with an air of genteel enthusiasm, “I have had a great time with Eiko in town and here at the castle. Isn’t that right, dear?” She turned to look at her daughter as the princess rammed, full force, into the queen. Garnet let out a chuckle as she rubbed the princess’s back, and she looked up at Zidane as he approached as well.

“I hope everything has been well for you too, Eiko.”

The princess looked up at the queen and shrugged as she released her. “Well, it’s really drafty and dusty around here, but Zidane has made things a lot more interesting.” She put her hands on her hips as Hilda

began sweating lightly, “I mean, the coolest thing that happened was Tantalus’s performance, and they’re from Lindblum, so it was *basically* Father’s idea.”

The entire room jumped (literally, as there was a miniature earthquake) when Quina leaped from the rafters and slammed into the tile. Everyone whirled to stare in bemusement at the Qu, who looked up and lifted the mushrooms they had collected. “For dinner!” They then dislodged themselves from the hole they made in the floor and jogged off, their tongue wagging along the way.

...There was silence for a moment... and Eiko’s neck disappeared as she shrugged very, *very* slowly, “Okay, maybe this visit *has* been pretty interesting.” Garnet might have laughed if she weren’t choking on her own horror at the work that would have to be done on the floor. Yet *another* thing they would have to put off until they finished rebuilding the town.

Breakfast was a much more mundane affair, but when it was finished, Cid was off to the airship hanger, which at this point was just the castle courtyard. Eiko was whining about having to go

home already, but Zidane didn't seem to notice it so much as Garnet kept her pacified. The genome watched as Beatrix walked along behind the procession, noting the general's stony countenance that matched Steiner's, and Zidane couldn't help but feel that there was a lot more to fix around Alexandria than the masonry.

Having to say goodbye to his friend was a little hard, regardless of his promise to see her again. Eiko reached up for one last highfive from the genome, and he settled on his haunches to smile at her in the eyes. "See you around, okay Eiko? I promise I'll visit as soon as possible. Besides, you got your cousins to hang out with right?" Hilda wouldn't stop talking about them; maybe she was hoping they could become friends.

Eiko's scoff showed it probably wouldn't happen. "Gordon acts like a child and Scott's a know-it-all. I can't imagine them having much more stimulating conversation than with *you* Zidane."

Well, the genome didn't doubt that, but if Eiko was going to calm down, she had to look forward to her return to Lindblum. "How about we gossip about them when I come to visit, like *real* nobles? If we do

that though, you're going to have to learn all about them so you can tell me how terrible they are."

Eiko was *all about* gossiping, however, and she nodded vigorously. "Oh man, I'm going to learn so *much stuff* about them, you don't even know!" The Lindblum princess gave Zidane one more hug and a proper (gasp) curtsy to Garnet before she took her father's hand and led him on the way to the Hilda Garde. The queen and her friend raised their hands to wave them off as the airship rose into the sky, and Eiko poked her head over the side of the banister and waved back at them with a shout that they couldn't hear over the ship's engine.

"I'm going to miss her," Zidane said out loud, nodding his head to show that he agreed with whatever Eiko was shouting about.

Garnet let out a sigh and smirked at her lover, "If only we could have kept her."

The genome laughed out loud at that, "I love her, but I do *not* envy Hilda being her mother."

Zidane assumed that Garnet would laugh, or hell, even chuckle, but her face scrunched up in what looked like thought, instead. The genome blinked at her as she pursed her lips and turned away, but

before he could ask what was wrong, (maybe it was something he said?) she snapped her fingers and turned to gesture for Beatrix, who was instantly at her side. Garnet then reached up and handed the general a paper while relaying her orders. “Collect Haagen and send Zidane out into the town. He has somewhere he wants to be.”

Beatrix’s surprise was not lost on either of them as she read off the paper and quirked an eyebrow. “Haagen is a Pluto Knight,” she stated the obvious with general surprise, “Why not have Steiner do it?”

Garnet’s eyes flit to Zidane’s, and the genome smirked as the two read each others’ thoughts, “I have another project I need Steiner to do; you can handle caring for a Pluto Knight, can’t you, general-of-the-army?”

The holy knight let out a laugh for the first time that day, “Touche, your majesty.” She then turned and gestured for Zidane to follow her with a nod of her head. “Come along then, I’ve got work to do after this.”

Zidane didn’t doubt that, and he jogged after her as she led the way towards the castle. He glanced back at Garnet, however, who smiled at him and

waved him off before turning to collect and speak with Steiner.

Finally, *finally* , Zidane could say with certainty that things were looking up.

Garnet walked serenely through the castle grounds, humming a bit as she moved. She barely made it three steps before she was collected by a couple of female guards, who noted she was alone and instantly set to the task of accompanying her until she found who she was looking for.

It wasn't long until she did just that. Adelbert Steiner was dragging Blutzen and Kohel through a practice run, she assumed, and shouting at them with just ferocity that it was easy to notice he was angry at something else. She winced slightly as she remembered her talk with Zidane. He really had been hurt, and now he was taking it out on everyone else around him. On the one hand, the captain should really learn how to keep from throwing a temper tantrum whenever things didn't go his way, but on the other hand, this was her fault this even happened, and she felt responsible.

The queen cleared her throat and caused the men to stop everything they were doing to face and salute her, and Garnet bowed her head before begging them to rise. “Steiner, I have something I wish to speak to you about.” She glanced at her ‘entourage’ before turning back to the captain. “Alone, if you would.”

Blutzen and Kohel both let out a jeering “ooooohhh!” as their leader winced. “I uhm, I’m working on setting an example for these rule-breaking, lackadaisical rubberneckers, Your Majesty. I apologize when I say I am... busy.” He choked on his words, unused to denying his queen anything...

It didn’t help that Garnet’s face didn’t relax into an understanding expression. She glanced at Blutzen and Kohel, her face as stone, and both of the Pluto Knights froze. The queen cleared her throat with authorial intent. “Jasmine, Marilyn, escort the Pluto Knights to their barracks and choose a new punishment for them. Be imaginative.”

The two women looked at each other with fiery, intense smiles, and when they looked to the men, the super sleuths let out unanimous cries and bolted from the room with their “entourages” in tow. Steiner pursed his lips as he watched everyone

leave, and he looked at Garnet's gently softening face. She smiled at him and hugged her arms, "Sorry, I just needed them out of the room quickly. I talked with Zidane....He told me to speak to you."

Steiner's entire demeanor changed. He seemed a lot less annoyed and more surprised, though the tension hadn't left his shoulders. "That nosy little piece of...!"

"...And I realized I hadn't been fair with you from the beginning, Steiner. The fault is mine." Queen Garnet stretched up to her full height, which was barely at his shoulder, and she looked at the Pluto Knight captain straight in the eye. "I have been keeping the truth from you, and it has been straining our relationship." To say nothing of Steiner's relationship with Beatrix, Zidane, and Alexandria in general.

The captain snorted involuntarily. "My apologies, Your Majesty. I should not have let my frustrations get the best of me." It didn't take a sage to figure out that he had been angry and hurt, and Garnet coming clean did very little to assuage his simmering rage. "I just... am very disappointed that you didn't trust me."

Garnet bit her lip to keep from blurting that Beatrix was the one who asked her to keep the secret, but... “I didn’t want to hurt you. I was afraid if I said anything, it would worry you. Zidane had to remind me that I already was in the wrong. Steiner, we have a problem.” The captain’s expression hardened as he steeled himself for the news, and Garnet gulped down a wad of bile from her upset stomach. “Steiner, the Burmecians wish me to turn over Beatrix.”

Steiner stared at his queen, and she allowed him enough time to process this information. She had expected him to explode immediately, but apparently he was taking some time to decide if she was lying (honestly, you keep the truth from people *once* and suddenly they aren’t able to trust you), until she saw that split second when he realized she would never lie about something that dire, especially about Beatrix. The queen’s heart sank when she saw the captain’s face blanch and turn ghastly white, which now “complimented” his darkened, sleep-deprived eyes. “Steiner, I’m sorry, this was why I didn’t want to tell you—”

“H-have you... decided if you will...?” he croaked, his throat too tight to speak higher than a whisper.

Garnet gasped and shook her head. “Oh, heavens! No, not yet; Freya said that she would support me whichever way I leaned, but I can’t in good conscious send Beatrix off to *die* .”

Steiner’s whining, squeaky sigh showed that he had been trying very hard not to consider his lover *dying* , but the fact that the queen had voiced what neither of them wanted to think about nearly caused him to break down. Garnet dropped her head and twiddled her thumbs as the captain considered everything. He let out a breath that he had been holding for a few moments, and he clanked when he flopped forward like a puppet whose strings were cut. “Oh, oh, Crystal be praised,” he squeaked, “I-I was afraid you were avoiding talking to me because you didn’t want me to know that you had decided to send her away.”

“Of course not!” Garnet said, raising her voice a little. She felt very passionate about her desire to keep her general out of harm’s way. “I refuse to send her off, they will *kill* her. But I can’t just ignore their pleas as well; we don’t know Beatrix’s circumstances exactly during the war (we were in Treno at the time, after all), but I do not doubt that she did indeed kill enough of their people to warrant some sort of recompense. I just wish I knew how to

explain to them that she was not... well, that there is still good in her..."

Steiner straightened up, and although he was breathing again, he now was beginning to hyperventilate, worried more about Beatrix's safety than the way he had been treated previously. "C-could we not hold a trial here, in Alexandria? Or in Treno? That way they will be more lenient..."

Garnet shook her head insistently, "No, that won't work. They'll say we're being biased." She shrugged, "The very idea that we'd be keeping her in our borders would be proof. The problem is that *their* judges would be biased too. It would turn into a show trial."

The queen looked up at the captain, who was cradling his chin in his gauntleted hand and mumbling to himself. He hardly moved when he was thinking, although Garnet supposed that it was more because his clanking would be annoying to think with. The queen began mumbling herself, but found it easier to rack her brain out loud. "If only we could find someone who was a neutral party..." Steiner stopped and looked up at his queen, and she closed her mouth to keep from gawking at him as their eyes met. "Did I say something?"

“Your Majesty, we *have* a neutral party!” the captain proclaimed, “Lindblum! What if we send Beatrix to Lindblum? Surely, Regent Cid would be lenient! He would understand!”

Garnet’s mood brightened considerably, and she smiled brightly at the thought. “Oh Steiner, we could, couldn’t we? Lindblum has good relations with both Burmecia and Alexandria. No one will deny that request, I don’t think...” She did, however, go quiet when a thought occurred to her. “But Uncle Cid isn’t a judge... whomever they choose... there’s still a chance they’ll decide to...”

Steiner also went quiet, and the two of them hummed thoughtfully. “I’m sorry, I hadn’t quite considered that fact.” After what the late queen had done to Lindblum, there would be plenty of people who were angry with Alexandria... but Steiner couldn’t bear to bring that up to Garnet. It was hard for any of the Alexandians to remember Brahne as anything but a loving mother and kind monarch. Beatrix was the same, and... if the judges asked for her death, then... “...At least it would truly be a fair trial.” Garnet looked up, and she watched as Steiner steeled himself and took a deep breath. “At least it would be a fair trial.” He repeated, nodding resolutely.

The queen gulped audibly and... “I shall consider this. Oh, and Steiner? Thanks for talking me through this. I never would have considered asking Uncle Cid.”

“O-of course, Your Majesty, I only wish to help you, and Beatrix, in any way possible.” He went quiet, and... “Perhaps another time, though? I’m sure Blutzen and Kohel would prefer anything I can come up with as opposed to the other guards...”

His queen giggled and finally smiled since their talk became serious. “Sure; I’ve got some stuff of my own to work on. We’ll talk later, okay?”

The captain nodded and set to the task of collecting his subordinates, leaving Garnet to wait for Jasmine and Marilyn’s return. As she did, she took the time to think about how she was going to bring up everything to Beatrix and the regent. If Cid agreed to it, would he choose the judge? What kind of person would they be? Was there really no way to make everyone happy while also saving Beatrix?

By the time the guards arrived to reconvene with their queen, Garnet looked up and smiled at them. “Thank you for your help. Shall we be on our way?” The two women saluted her in response, and the three were off.

6. Isn't This a Happy Day?

Zidane and Beatrix were soon out in the Alexandrian town square; by the time they passed by the statues of the three mystic generals, Beatrix pulled out the order and snorted, “Cotton, was it?” She asked, glancing over at the genome as he nonchalantly glanced at a cute girl by the flower stand, “Apparently you’re going to just give it out to random people?”

“Not ‘random’,” Zidane explained, “There’s a lady I know who’s a little too old to run around fixing things, and I figure everyone needs to do a little work to help Alexandria. I’m just helping people find work!”

Beatrix pursed her lips and handed the order off to the genome before motioning up ahead. “And there’s Haagen. Soldier! Fall In!” She barked loudly enough that everyone in a wide perimeter turned to glance over, and the Pluto Knight, who was standing stock still by a fruit cart, whirled around and saluted. ‘Haagen, Pluto Knight VIII, reporting for duty, sir!’ He jumped when he noticed who was calling for

him, and he snapped back at attention, “Ma’am Sir Ma’am!”

“At ease, Number VIII,” Beatrix replied as the two approached the knight. He dropped his hand and glanced at Zidane as the general gestured to him, “This is Zidane; you’ll be escorting him to...”

“...TO JAIL!!?” Haagen shouted, hand on his sword’s hilt, “This is the same thief who attempted to kidnap Queen Garnet on her sixteenth birthday! As expected of you, General, to catch such a notorious enemy of the state!”

Zidane chuckled to himself as Beatrix crossed her arms and shook her head, sighing lightly, “No, Haagen, he’s not an enemy of any state (I hope). Haven’t you heard of Queen Garnet’s friend Zidane? He’s been wandering around the castle ever since Tantalus’ play three days ago; you can’t tell me you haven’t at least heard of him?”

Haagen peered at the genome and eyed him up and down. “I guess so, but I’m watching you! If you make one false move, shifty thief-dude, then I’ll bring down my full fury on you!”

Zidane smirked and shrugged a bit before holding up Garnet’s order “You’re going to help me collect

some cotton, and we're going to deliver it to a little old lady who needs some work. You up for it?"

The Pluto Knight scoffed and puffed out his chest, "Helping little old ladies is what I do best! General Beatrix, you may count on me to have this order fulfilled posthaste!" He saluted the general, who nodded back before turning on her heel.

"I'll leave you to it. Now, I have somewhere I need to be. Be quick, will you?" She then stalked off back towards the castle, grumbling about being forced to do menial labor like a private. That just left Haagen and Zidane, who shrugged at each other as the townspeople went back to their daily lives (aside from the group of people who pined over the fact that *By the gods Lady Beatrix was right there do you think she noticed me maybe I should send her a letter do you think she'd appreciate it ahhhhhhhh!!?*) The men turned and were soon off, and the genome tried to strike up some conversation as they did so; the Pluto Knight apparently didn't keep his thumb to the pulse of the people that frequented the castle, and the last thing he needed was to get jumped by this dude the next time they encountered each other.

“So uhm, name’s Zidane, a friend of Dagger’s. Uh, Garnet’s. Sorry about the whole ‘kidnapping’ thing, Regent Cid just wanted her out of Alexandria, is all.” Man, that whole escapade seemed like forever ago; he sort of missed the days when they could spend the night in a humble Dalian inn. Maybe he could find a way to get her out of the castle for a romantic getaway some day.

“So it was you!” Haagen proclaimed, poking an angry finger at the genome during his daydreaming, “I’d remember that smug look and stupid vest anywhere! I’ll have you know that I was only going easy on you when we were fighting on that theater ship! You’d better not hurt Her Majesty, or my fury will never be sated!”

“Thanks for the warning, but Steiner’s got all that covered. I assure you that he already made that threat seventeen... *hundred*... times.” Zidane slipped his hands into his pockets, and they went quiet for only a moment... until he spoke up again with a cheeky swish of his tail. “It’s a weird 180 you just gave me, though; you don’t care that Dagger and I are friends?” Nor that he apparently had a nickname for her?

“I trust Queen Garnet with my life! She is a wonderful monarch and a good judge of character!” Haagen explained with a tone of adoration and love for his country, ‘If she has decided to befriend you, then I trust her judgment!’ Zidane nodded sagely and decided not to point out that just a moment ago he threatened to unleash his fury on the recipient of her “good judgment”. Oh well, when it came to Pluto Knights, some things never changed.

It was at that time that the two encountered little Ilia, who was skipping in the streets with a rock to make the cobblestones a little harder to hopscotch over. When Zidane called out to her, however, she looked up and let out a cry of joy. “Mister Tail!” she called, waving to him and jogging over to meet him, “Did you meet Queen Garnet? Did you *kiss* her!?”

Haagen glanced at Zidane as the genome dropped down to look her in the eye again. He needed to find some way to steer the conversation away from one that’d get Haagen ‘unleashing his fury’ or whatever, “Why don’t we go and pick up that cotton for your grandmother? We can talk about the queen another time.”

Ilia watched as the genome produced Queen Garnet’s order, and her eyes lit up at the thought of

helping her grandmother. “Thanks so much, Mister Tail! I’m sure Gramma will appreciate it too!”

Zidane stood up and moved to speak to Haagen... but someone interrupted him instead. “...Is that a Pluto Knight!?” A young male voice called out. Everyone turned to appraise the man dressed in some dirty, raggedy clothes and a cap far too big for his head, who approached the three with trepidatious enthusiasm, “Oh my goodness, I haven’t actually been able to talk to one of you when you’re off duty before!”

“Still technically on duty, citizen!” Haagen proclaimed, puffing up when he realized that someone was asking specifically for him, “No autographs right now; if there’s nothing else to say, then please move along!”

“Oh, hey Ryan,” Zidane said, stretching a bit as the young man squirmed with delight. This was the kid that the genome had seen wandering the streets, fixing up the city and praising the Pluto Knights in all of their... unique glory. “Still hoping to land a spot in the Pluto Knights, huh?”

“Hoping!?” Ryan practically shouted, a little hurt, ‘I’ve been training every moment I’m not rebuilding, well, buildings! Next time Captain

Steiner holds a tourney to see who has the mettle, I'm *definitely* getting in!' He turned back to Haagen with a twinkle in his eye, "Please look forward to working with me! Oh Oh Oh, *Idea!* What if I help you guys out with whatever you're doing? Surely you must need me to do some sort of menial labor! If I do it, will you put in a good word for me with the captain? Please please *please?*"

Even Haagen was having a little difficulty deciding what to do with the excitable Alexandrian, and both he and Zidane blinked at each other. It was the genome who shrugged first. "I mean, it can't hurt, right? And I'm friends with Steiner anyway; it wouldn't be hard to at least name drop you."

"Ahhhhh Crystal be praised! I'm going to be a *Pluto Knight!* I can hardly believe it!" Ryan practically sang, charging forward to slam Zidane on the shoulder and pump his fist, 'Finally, things are looking up for Ryan!' The four stood stock still, blinking for a good moment, until Ryan smiled obliviously at Zidane, "So uhm, where are we even going, anyway?"

Zidane smirked at Haagen as "Number VIII" shrugged; yep, Ryan would definitely fit right in with the others, no doubt about it.

General Beatrix returned to the castle with a stately walk, her expression like steel as she walked through the courtyard and approached her subordinates. “Ahh, Laura, I assume your route is secure?”

“As secure as it’ll ever be, General!” Laura saluted, placing her hands behind her back, ‘Queen Garnet is in the library. She just finished speaking to Captain Steiner, because let’s be honest, it’s never a ‘conversation’ when a Pluto Knight’s involved, am I right?’ She let out a guffaw for an entire minute, right up until she realized that Beatrix wasn’t laughing. The soldier coughed into her hand and looked askance. “Right, so uhm. I’ll... keep my patrol up.”

“You do that,” the general intoned flatly, waving Laura off as she headed into the castle. It looked like things were running smoothly, so she decided to see if her queen needed anything before preparing for tomorrow. As her heels clacked on the broken tile of the castle, her mind began to wander towards the new goings-on in Alexandria the past few days. Zidane was helping Queen Garnet in his own way, but everything was quickly becoming topsy-turvy. She wondered if the castle would return to running

smoothly when she was gone, and she winced when she felt her heart squeeze in her chest.

She couldn't be sure if she wished Steiner would miss her when she was gone...

Her boots clacked on the steps to the library, alerting Queen Garnet to her presence, and the queen looked up from the book she was pouring over. "Oh, Beatrix. I'm glad you made it. I wanted to talk to you."

"I'm always available for you, Your Majesty," Beatrix replied, bowing low as Garnet rose from her seat, "How may I serve you?"

Garnet leaned on the desk, thinking of how she would bring up ignoring Beatrix's plea, and finally she took a deep breath and pushed off of the desk, nodding at the general, "I spoke to Steiner. His 'project' wasn't an actual task, per se." Beatrix's face went from neutral to apathetic as she began to assume what the 'project' actually was, and she couldn't keep from sighing when Garnet proved her right, "I told him about the letter from Burmecia. He deserves to know."

Of *course* Garnet couldn't keep herself from worrying for Steiner's sake. The Pluto Knight

Captain seemed to make it his duty to do whatever he could to ignore Beatrix's words when it came to training his subordinates, and now even the queen, whom the general had begun to trust as a beacon of impartiality in this tempest of emotional destruction, was beginning to ignore her orders and act as if she were little more than a child still enchained by the thrall of romance. "Whether he does or doesn't shouldn't matter," Beatrix said, her tone as sharp as *Save the Queen* and just as quick. Garnet actually flinched; she was used to Steiner simpering under her rule, but Beatrix did not care about telling the queen when she had done something wrong, "He doesn't *need* to know. Not when I'm here. He'll dote on me as if I were a child."

Garnet shook her head and pleaded with her general, hoping to appeal to a gentler nature. "He only wants to help you, Beatrix. I've seen the passion he shows for people he cares about."

"Then you should know the lengths he goes to 'protect' people. I am not a girl to be coddled, and you of all people know this. He shouldn't. I..." Beatrix opened her mouth, and for the first time, something caught in her throat, and she felt her choke on her words. "I... cannot bear to see him worry for me. I-I do not deserve such adoration."

Garnet searched the general's eye, a film of tears welling in the queen's own, "Oh, Beatrix. Of course you do. You-you deserve..."

"Nothing!" the general bit back with a hiss, 'Your Majesty, I left the decision up to you because I trusted you to make the right one, but I'm beginning to see that you're no better than Steiner at keeping your emotions in check.' Garnet's eyes were now wet with her tears, and Beatrix tried desperately not to give her any leeway. And yet, she couldn't stop the doubt from creeping up, and she reminded her queen of her main duties, "You would put the safety of one person above those of your entire kingdom; Queen Brahne would never have done such a terrible thing."

"My mother sent the entire world to war and nearly helped Kuja destroy it!" Garnet shouted, slamming her fist onto the desk. Beatrix halted immediately, surprised and vaguely impressed that her queen stood up to her like that. 'I am not my mother, and I refuse to make the same mistakes she did! But you, *General Beatrix*, must learn to trust that I, *Queen Garnet* til Alexandros XVII, will do what I can to protect *everyone* in my country, and I *refuse* to hurt my best friends by sending one of them off to *die*.' She turned away from Beatrix to

keep from shouting any further, and she did something much more constructive with her rage. Beatrix watched as she immediately began cleaning the desk, closing the books and stacking them in order, and the two stood in relative silence, Garnet's bold determination practically radiating from her as she spoke up once more. "I know what you want, Beatrix. You pray for justice. As do I, every moment."

"Then why do you keep me here?" Beatrix asked, her eye flitting to glance in Garnet's direction for a moment before finding her father's globe much more 'interesting' to look at, "I have done nothing to help this world. I did nothing to stop Queen Brahne; I *deserve* this."

"You *deserve* a fair trial, and I doubt the Burmecians will give you one." Beatrix opened her mouth to ask how in the *world* they would find someone who *would*, but Garnet cut her off when she turned to her with a sudden smirk, "Which was why, when I spoke to Steiner, he realized that Lindblum would be the one to give it to you."

The General stopped, her mouth stuck agape, and Garnet's expression turned smug when Beatrix

pursed her lips and considered this fact. "...You say Steiner was the one who brought this up?"

"I know! I was just as surprised as you!" The queen's smile turned cat-like as she recalled that moment, "He must *really* be worried about you if he's actually coming up with such good ideas."

A smirk twitched on Beatrix's features, and she immediately felt guilty for feeling better, even for a second. "Come now, Your Majesty, I just visually berated Laura for saying such rude things about the 'good' captain." She placed a hand on her hip and watched as Garnet pulled out a kerchief and wiped her tears away. "...Perhaps I underestimated the both of you, however. I highly doubt the Lindblumians will be much more lenient, but..."

"...I trust Uncle Cid to help us in any way possible. Our world of Gaia is a history of Mist-Feuds; not one of our kingdoms is innocent of bloodshed. We'll find a way to end this hatred. Steiner and I saved the world; we'll find a way to save you, too."

Garnet snorted, crossing her arms with an air of finality, and the two glared at each other. Beatrix felt her queen's desire to protect and assist, and her will was so strong that it allowed Beatrix to finally,

finally , relax and slump forward, looking as vulnerable as she now felt. “I-I don’t deserve this.” She managed to whisper. “Your drive, your desire to protect. It should not be wasted on me.”

The Alexandrian queen suddenly smiled, uncrossing her arms and nodding gently. “If you truly believed that, Beatrix, you wouldn’t be here.” The general looked down at Garnet, and the queen’s eyes caused Beatrix to gasp, for they reminded her of that night...

I-I never wish to lose you again!!!

...And the general’s shoulders heaved as she chuckled. “...Ah. Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps...” After all this time, all she wanted was for someone to *help*. She took a deep breath, straightened up, and shook out her hair. In a moment, she was back to her steely expression and sharp posture. “You’re right, we did need this talk; it has opened my eyes. I-I will consider your stance. However, I will be very busy now. There are so many things that must be finished before... before Lindblum, *apparently* . Your Majesty, I regret that I must take my leave of you at this moment.”

“Of course, Beatrix,” Garnet said, smiling up into her general’s eye, “Please, continue to trust me; I

won't let anything happen to you as long as I can help it."

Beatrix bowed before she shook her head good-naturedly at her queen. "I will never understand your generosity, Your Majesty, but, as ever, it is always appreciated." And with that, she turned on her heel and clacked from the room. Thinking back on all the things that had gone on, Beatrix's mind was a whirlwind of emotion, and somewhere, deep in the eye of the squall of her heart, there were those who loved her.

Perhaps she *did* wish for Steiner to miss her while she was away.

The three men and small girl were already on their way back to Alexandria, with a chocobo-drawn cart in tow. Apparently the usual driver was late or ill, and when the four arrived at the airship dock outside of town, the frantic keeper waved them down and begged them to bring everything back to town before the food spoiled. Luckily, Ryan was a farmer's son, and had no trouble hitching up the chocobo, and soon the four were off on the road back into the city.

Ilia ran alongside the wheels of the carriage, singing the “chocobo song”, as she called it (It mostly consisted of many offkey ‘kwehs’), Haagen sat next to Ryan and took a nap, and Zidane made sure that Ilia didn’t bother the chocobo, as the birds tended to be pretty finicky and didn’t even think twice about snapping off the hand of a person that bugged them. There were reasons monsters didn’t even bother attacking them out in the fields, with very few exceptions. “We’re being heroes today!” the child proclaimed as they walked along the road.

“I’m basically a Pluto Knight already!” Ryan agreed, eliciting a chuckle from Zidane.

“Glad everyone’s in such high spirits.” The castle wasn’t nearly as cheerful as this group; the genome was happy to know that there were still people who knew how to have a good time. “Once we finish this up, I promise I’ll talk to Steiner at some point, and you can show him your sword techniques.”

“Sword techniques!! *That’s* what I was forgetting to practice!” Ryan shouted just as the carriage hit a rock, jolting Haagen awake.

“Don’t worry, Captain! I’ll save you!” the Pluto Knight cried a split second before his dream dissipated and he realized where he was. Ryan’s cap

slid over his eyes, and he pushed his hat up as everyone blinked at Haagen, and the Pluto Knight stretched and immediately changed the subject. “We almost there? This chocobo’s so slow...!”

The bird let out an indignant “kweh!” as she walked along, and Ryan pulled his hat back up to look at the upcoming gate. “Almost there! And look, there’s a few people waiting for us!”

Haagen peered into the distance as Zidane watched Ilia rush forward, “You sure that’s a bunch of people, it looks more like one *big* perso—” The Pluto Knight blanched when he noticed how white the creature was. As it waddle-charged towards them, Haagen let out a howl and leaped from the carriage. “Crapbaskets, it’s Quina!” Not even the most furious Pluto Knight was stupid enough to mess with a hungry Qu!

Quina’s war cry caused even Ilia to pause, but they rushed past her without even an acknowledging glance, and it was Zidane who had the guts to put himself between the food and the Qu. “Yo, Quina! Calm yourself, what’s the problem?”

“Problem!? Food never came!” The Qu shouted, wagging their tongue all around Zidane and tasting the trace amounts of dust, sweat, and *Nolrich Coffee*

Beans (keep it together Quina!) off of the Genome's person, "No devil peppers for curry! How to feed entire castle with table scraps!?"

"You ran all the way out here because you didn't have any devil peppers?" Ryan asked, pulling the chocobo to a stop as the carriage arrived next to the two, "That doesn't sound like table scraps. Can't you just substitute with something else?"

Ilia had just arrived at that moment, and Zidane reached out to pull her away as Quina jumped up next to Ryan (eliciting a squeal from both the driver and the chocobo), and the Qu immediately tasted the salt and fear that radiated from the young man's sweat as they bore down on him with a dead stare. "Substitute! Why not build house with paper? Why not paint with *feces* !?" The Qu didn't bother listening to Ryan's rebuttal, if there was one, and instantly proceeded to pick up a barrel of devil peppers, cabbages, and coffee beans each before jumping off of the carriage and lumbering off, grumbling all the way.

Ilia clung to Zidane with a whimper as Ryan fought to restart his heart. It was Haagen who first spoke, poking his head up from behind the carriage with a cough. "Are they gone?" he asked. When

Ryan nodded with a high-pitched squeal that sounded like air being let out of a balloon, the Pluto Knight pulled himself back up onto the ride, suddenly unruffled. “See, I learned a long time ago not to mess with that guy.”

“There’s a reason Quina was traveling with us at the end of it all,” Zidane muttered, helping Ilia down on the ground. “They’re fiercer than most, as you can see.”

“D-duly noted...!” Ryan muttered, snapping the reins and thanking the Crystal that the chocobo wasn’t too petrified to move.

The cart wasn’t accosted any further as they arrived in the city, and a friendly fishman picked up the entire thing with a clipboard to sign off on everything. He then saluted the four as they picked up the cotton they required, and Ilia led the way to her grandmother’s home with an attempt at a whistle. The walk was uneventful and mostly quiet, and when Ilia knocked on the door and opened it, she called out to her grandmother happily, “Gramma! I’m here!”

“Ilia, is that you...?” the elderly woman asked as she sat idly in a chair at the table in the middle of the tiny, one room house. She continued to stare at the

wall, away from the group, and she reached her bony hand out for her granddaughter. Ilia hopped forward and took her grandmother's hand, and the woman turned her milky-white eyes at the girl's forehead. "I hear someone else. Is Granpa here?"

"Sorry, ma'am," Zidane called, completely forgetting that he should have probably announced himself before wandering into a blind woman's house, 'We're here for a delivery, nothing too important.' It was then that Haagen and Ryan placed their small barrels on the floor with a soft "thump", and Zidane tried not to tense when the woman's head turned ever so slightly, staring off at the doorway.

"What delivery do you have? That sounds like too much for just food."

"Grama, Mister Tail came to help!" Ilia explained, petting the woman's hand with a giddy bounce, "He's going to give you cotton! You can spin it for people and help out! Grama, Grama, you can *help*!"

"Ilia, what did you do?" the girl's grandmother chastised, turning back to her with a confused frown, "You aren't being a bother, are you? Your parents entrusted your care to me while they're working..."

“Nah, don’t worry ma’am, Queen Garnet and I wanted to help out.” Zidane placed his own barrel on the floor and walked forward, standing near Ilia and dropping down with his legs crossed. He looked up at the woman and swept his tail along the floor, trying to sound as nonthreatening as possible. “I heard that you’re having trouble finding work, and no one wants to feel like they can’t help out. I figure you wouldn’t mind spinning some cotton, you think? I have some gil; you can have it now and I’ll send someone to pick up the spun cotton tomorrow. Sound like a plan?”

The woman’s confused expression didn’t change. “I-I-I don’t think... There’s no reason for you to be doing this for me... for us. Why would you even think to do so?”

Zidane stood up and pulled the pouch of several hundred gil from his belt before tenderly taking the woman’s hand (Ilia released her and hopped back with a giggle) and placing it into her palm, “Because this is our home of Alexandria, and I don’t want anyone to feel left out. Please, take your time, and if you have any other questions, just talk to my friend tomorrow. Sound okay?”

Ilia bounced with joy as her grandmother slowly, shakily, drew the pouch to her lap, and she stared at the wall as she opened the pouch and mouthed the numbers she counted for a few moments. She then looked across at Zidane's chest, her eyes watering with surprise and thankfulness, "It's more than I could ask for, sir. Her Majesty is far too kind. I... I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything, ma'am!" Haagen announced suddenly, saluting the women even though she could not see him do so, "A Pluto Knight always does what is right for the country he loves!"

"And Pluto Knights-in-training!" Ryan proclaimed....He then coughed and whispered to Haagen: "...Or is that too presumptuous right now?"

"I cannot thank you enough," the old woman croaked, her emotions finally getting the best of her as she began to weep, "I will do whatever I can for Alexandria, and if spinning is what you need me to do, then I shall happily spin as long as these old bones will let me."

"Gramma, Gramma, don't cry!" Ilia said, reaching out to pet her grandmother's arm, "Isn't this a happy day?"

“Oh, oh yes, dear, I’m very happy.” After placing the pouch on the table, the woman reached out and wrapped her arms around her beloved granddaughter before drawing her close, “I’m as happy as can be...!”

The two held each other close, and neither noticed nor heard the genome slip from the house and close the door behind him.

7. Midnight Interlude

The day was finished, and guards were relieving each other of their posts. Zidane had a pretty exciting day, all told, but he was happy to be back with Garnet, who seemed just as happy to be with him. The queen practically jogged over to the young genome, and she wrapped her arms around him in adoration. “Did you have a good day?” she asked, ignoring the smell of chocobo on his vest (It wasn’t like she hated chocobos, they just tended to have a very overpowering scent, and she would be happy to have him take a bath the moment she could get him to). Zidane didn’t notice her minor aversion to his “new” musk, and he leaned over to nuzzle her temple affectionately.

“The people of Alexandria are so happy, Dagger. You make their day just by being alive and helping them live out their days. I’m so proud to know you.” Not everyone in the castle shared that same happy drive, but that just meant he only had one thing to work on instead of many.

“You’re helping too,” Garnet replied, pulling back to look him in the eye with all the love she

could possess, “You haven’t even been here a week and you’re already finding things you can do in town. I can’t possibly thank you enough for all of the help you’ve given Alexandria. This isn’t even the land you grew up in, and yet here you are...”

Zidane chuckled and helped draw a few strands of hair behind her ear, “Lindblum’s got Cid and Eiko, and my bros in Tantalus can handle whatever life throws at them. *You* need help, however, and I’m ready to give all the help I can.” His smile turned impish and he leaned down to whisper, “Although I can think of a few ways you can ‘thank me’ for my help...”

Garnet turned a bright red and slapped his arm in an attempt to stop her smile, “Stop it, you! In front of everyone, too!”

“It’s not like we couldn’t guess what sort of person he was anyway,” the two heard Elizabeth say as she approached from the side. The queen nearly laughed as Zidane’s face blanched ever so slightly, and her lady-in-waiting gave him a half-banked glare. “Yes, you *were* flirting with Her Majesty and not with her ‘clone’.”

The genome’s relief was palpable, and Garnet couldn’t contain her laughter. “You can’t tell the way

her hair curls at the edges? I feel it should be obvious to anyone who's actually looking." To be fair, however, it wasn't like Zidane actually *looked* at the cute girls he was flirting with.

...Garnet did her best not to feel a pang of jealousy, knowing that he was probably oogling the city girls outside of the palace. She knew he wouldn't act upon it; he wouldn't be here if he was just going to leave and find someone else, but it still hurt, knowing deep down who he would always be. Elizabeth glanced her queen's way, noting flash of hurt in her sovereign's eyes, and cleared her throat. All eyes were on her as she bowed to the queen. "Your Majesty, will you be turning in for the evening? Please be careful of any bed bugs." She glanced at Zidane with a stare as icy as Beatrix's, "You know how good ticks are at leeching."

"Beth!" Queen Garnet hissed lowly, hoping no one else heard that, "That was uncalled for! What has gotten into you!?"

Garnet's lady-in-waiting immediately changed her tune, knowing that she had overstepped a boundary. "Your Majesty, forgive my indiscretion," Elizabeth replied with another bow, "Surely you of all people know how to take care of yourself." She

straightened up, although her eyes never left the genome's face before she turned fully around and moved to her chambers.

Garnet shook her head, her red face looking much more embarrassed than scandalized as she turned to Zidane with an apology. "I have never seen her act that way. She doesn't even respond to the Pluto Knights when they flirt with her. I feel horrible that she treated you so terribly..."

Zidane shook his head and kissed her forehead, "Eh, it's no worse than the crap Steiner tossed my way when we were traveling. Besides, you know I don't care about that; if anything it just makes me want to prove them wrong."

Garnet nodded, lowering her hands so she wasn't twiddling her thumbs in embarrassment, and she took his hand with a smile. "Hehehe, Steiner was pretty insufferable on a part of our journey. I remember it quite well." Almost like it was yesterday, especially now, when he still smelled of chocobo and grime...

The memory of their adventure together caused something to awaken in her, and she felt, for the first time in a while, like an adventurer again. She regained a mischievous smile as Zidane reached out

to kiss her again, and with a giggle, she pulled away from him. “Oh no...! I think you’re going to have to work for it this time...!” she insisted, hitching her dress and jogging off.

Zidane sat stunned for a half second before his instincts kicked in, and his tail went into overdrive as he pounced after her. “I didn’t know you were into being chased...!” he called after her as she skipped up the stairs towards her room. Garnet rushed past her guards (Kathy tried to ask what was going on and nearly got an elbow to the face), and she slammed into the door to her room with a giddy laugh. Unfortunately, she was so busy laughing that she only managed to get the door open just in time for Zidane to grab her from behind and lift her clear into the air. “Got you, you minx!”

Garnet screamed in delight and kicked her legs, her feet slapping against the still open door, and Kathy turned to Tiana. Both of the guards watched with gaping mouths as Zidane turned around and pushed the door open fully with his back. “Excuse me, ladies.”

“Zidane Tribal you put me down this instant!” Garnet demanded with a delighted laugh.

“You told me I had to work for this and *by the Crystal I worked for this!*” Zidane announced, and the women watched as Garnet kicked the door closed with her foot. The two guards stared at each other, completely flabberghasted...

“...Let’s uhm... let’s not speak of this to anyone...” Kathy muttered.

“Are you *kidding?*” Tiana proclaimed, ‘Come tomorrow morning *everyone* is going to know about this!’ Queen Garnet, getting “abducted” by a sneaky thief *once again!* If that wasn’t the most hilarious news all month, Tiana didn’t know what was!

Beatrix sat at the foot of her bed in her room, staring at the mirror on her vanity in nothing but her underwear and eye-patch. She hadn’t moved for a good thirty minutes after removing her chemise and pants, and instead was stuck in intense thought. Were Bert and Her Majesty correct? Was there something inside her worth saving? It was a dilemma that she was having trouble coming to a conclusion for. She was conflicted in the worst way possible: she wanted to believe that this was the best way to atone for everything she had done, and yet

some primal part of her still feared to face what she thought she deserved... When it came down to it, she really was the most cowardly person she knew. Too cowardly to stand up to Queen Brahne, and too cowardly to face the consequences of her actions...

It was a long while before the door opened and her lover peeked into the room. When Steiner wasn't wearing his armor and didn't have any reason to be shouting, she found he could be very quiet when he wished to be....It was with a little regret that she assumed he was quiet around her because he was cowed by her rather intense attitude, but she couldn't find the words to apologize; she still wasn't sure if she was going to survive the next month. She assumed it would be better if he found reason to dislike her so he wouldn't miss her when, if, when?...*If* she didn't make it back to Alexandria when she was sent off to Lindblum.

Steiner had moved inside the room while she was thinking, although when she didn't immediately respond, he paused his advance. She could see him in the reflection of the mirror, and it took her a moment before she looked up and met his eyes. She eventually moved over a little bit and pet the spot next to her, silently allowing him to join her. Steiner didn't say a word as he walked over and flopped

next to her on the bed. Beatrix felt selfish for desiring his touch when she was so intent on pushing him away yesterday, but she didn't quite care at that point, so lonely was she that night, and she slipped her arm around his and flopped her head on his shoulder. "I like your shoulder," she said suddenly, quietly, "It's so broad and comforting. Not bony at all." She could fall asleep on it if she wanted to... if he wasn't wearing any armor.

Steiner reached his entwined arm up and took her calloused hand in his, and the two turned to watch their hands meld together and hold each other desperately. As the general watched him rub his fingers along hers, she heard him suck in a breath, considering his words before opening his mouth. "I... I'm sorry I was cross with you yesterday. I should have realized you would only keep things from me if it was very important."

There was a hint of a lie in his voice, Beatrix could tell, but she assumed it was because he wanted to make up with her after their spat last night, and he wasn't as angry at her as he was missing her touch....Just like she already missed his; even through the callouses on both of their hands, the way he rubbed her fingers with his sent a jolt through her entire system.

The feeling was so enjoyable that she fought to drag him closer. She wished to be closer to him, so much so that she decided to help mend the fence as well, "...I was the one who asked Queen Garnet to keep it from you. I was... I was hoping that you would dislike me enough to not miss me when I was sent away to Burmecia, and yet now I have hurt both you and Her Majesty more than if I had just been straight with you." She sighed deeply, leaning on him for support as her head drooped in sadness. "I lost my temper with Queen Garnet as well. I thought that neither you nor she were listening to me, but it was I who refused to listen to either of you. I-I'm so sorry, Bert, I was just hoping to spare you..."

Steiner reached up with his free hand to place it on her arm, and she naturally turned towards him a little so that he could place a soft kiss on her temple. "Oh Beatrix, you must know that there is nothing in the world that can keep me away from your side. I would never dislike you just because of one small spat. I... I could not bear to be away from you." He shrugged helplessly as a thought occurred to him, "Besides, I highly doubt you would have hated me if I suddenly acted cold towards *you*."

Beatrix paused, and suddenly she chuckled, both at her realization and his silly expression. "You

brushed me off yesterday by the moat, that's true..." and of course she wouldn't dislike him for just one mistake... and neither would he hate her just because she childishly pushed him away. They had been together for all of this time, and yet he still found ways to surprise her, discovering such a simple solution for such a complicated problem. "I apologize, Bert. I was acting like a fool, and I should have considered every point instead of hiding behind my own fear. I just wanted..."

He kissed her temple once again, and Beatrix's voice caught in her throat. She tried hard not to shiver from the beautiful familiarity of his touch, "I know, Bea," the captain admitted, "I am unsure if I would do the same thing in your position, but I know I would try to spare you any hardship. I-I..." He trembled, his voice suddenly small. He seemed embarrassed and choked on his next words before he worked around his embarrassment, "...I care very much for you, Bea. I'd do whatever I could to help you..."

The general felt her heart flutter despite herself, and she chided herself mentally for acting like a twitterpated teen, "I care for you too, Bert. Very much so. And it's appreciated how much you wish to help. Next time, I swear I shall be much more

receptive to both you and Her Majesty's attempts to assist me. The two of you, more than anyone, have taught me the value of relying on others." She turned to him slowly and smiled, reaching up to take off his skullcap and ruffle what little hair he had left on his balding head, "Thank you, Bert. I never realized until now how much I rely on you, in actuality."

Steiner searched her eye, and they held each other close for a moment, so close she could feel his beating heart thudding heavily. It took a moment before she realized her own heart was beating just as quickly, and she assumed her face was just as red as his was growing. "Bert, please," she murmured, their faces so close she could feel his hot breath on her lips...

She leaned in, but she stopped when the captain, completely caught up in the moment, blurted something straight out without any warning. "I love you, Bea," he whispered as if praying. Both of the knights halted for a good moment, as even Steiner was surprised by his quiet outburst. The two stared at each other, both too befuddled to act first...

Beatrix could feel her heart thud in her ears... and her brows knit in irritation. "Damn you, Bert, don't just tell me...!" she insisted, whipping herself

around and landing in the terrified Steiner's lap, straddling him with obvious intent as she grasped the collar of his shirt. "*Show me, you oaf!*"

When the two had first began dating, their couplings were rote and purposeful, like a pair of guards going through the motions of memorized sparring. That night, however, was the first time that their "sparring" was wild, desperate, and needy. For that moment, they needed each other more than they could say, and instead they let their actions speak for them.

They didn't know what the future might bring to them, but they knew that from then on, they would face it together as long as they possibly could.

8. Prince Consort

Zidane awoke a little earlier than normal, for he dreamed he was being strangled by a constrictor, and when he opened his eyes, he found that Garnet was squeezing him tight, perhaps because she didn't want him to crawl away like last morning. He didn't wish another nightmare on her, not like yesterday, and he shifted so he wasn't being crushed, but he didn't pull away from her and turned to look at her expression.

Ahhh, there she was, her angelic face instinctively burying in his naked chest. It was only then that he wondered if she was going to drool on him sometime down the road; it might have been cute when she did it to a pillow, but he wondered how he might take it if she did it while they were sleeping in the middle of the night...

She shifted slightly, and the jolt through the genome's body proved that it was *very aware* of a soft, female body pressed against his, and he wriggled a bit with a cough. It really wasn't her fault, she was just being clingy, like usual. "Hey,

hey, Dagger,” he whispered, kissing the crown of her head, “I gotta, *ngh*, can you wake up for a sec?”

Garnet murmured, roused from her slumber by his speech, and her lips on his skin sent another jolt through his body and *holy shit* was he getting *a* roused at that point. “Mmm... Zidane?” she asked, pulling back ever so slightly so she could look up at him in the eyes, “Oh, you waited up for me. Thank you...”

Not like he had much of a choice; she was still holding him “captive” at this point. He reached up and cupped her face with a smile, “You were looking so cute, so I didn’t want to bother you yesterday. Would you prefer if I woke you up next time?”

Garnet nodded with a small yawn, “Mmhm, then Beth won’t chastise me anymore. Oh, Zidane?” She blushed red and looked up at the genome with an embarrassed grin, “I’m so sorry about last night.”

Zidane tried not to turn green at the thought; that night started out so good, and then, well, the queen’s inexperience kicked in, and... “It’s not your fault, you’ll get there in time, just uh, next time, try *not* to twist off the little guy...?”

“I-I didn’t want to hurt you!” Garnet said defensively, her mouth agape in horror, “I just, I was thinking that maybe it would be okay and I didn’t realize how *sensitive* it was and...!”

Zidane almost laughed at how much she was over-analyzing the situation, but he didn’t want her to think he was laughing at her attempts to be active in her first real sexual encounter. Besides, over-analyzing the situation was what made Garnet herself, and he wouldn’t trade anything about her for the world. “Well, that time it *was* a little spontaneous. Next time we’ll get some supplies, okay?” The genome was sure that anyone in the castle would leap at the opportunity to help their queen release some stress....Well, anyone who wasn’t a sassy cousin-clone who hated his guts.

Zidane kissed the back of Garnet’s hand and watched her form as the queen rose from her bed semi-reluctantly, and the genome was instantly reminded of the saying “hate to see her leave but love to watch her go.” He tried not to leer too much; she was still skittish about sex when she wasn’t aroused, and instead he lounged on his stomach, flicking his tail and trying to give her something just as nice to look at. By the time she put on some underwear and turned around, she actually sprayed a

fine mist into the air from her sudden laughter. ‘Zidane, what in the world are you doing!?’ she crowed as the genome stretched and, once again, wagged his tail. Garnet threw a blouse at him with a laugh before pulling another one out of her dresser. “Hurry up and get dressed before Beth comes in,” she said offhandedly.

With a groan, her lover rolled over and slipped the blouse on, ignoring its frilly lace as he found his vest. When Garnet looked back up at the now fully clothed genome, still wearing the lacy blouse under his vest, her heart slammed into her chest, and Zidane caught the way her pupils dilated. When he grinned ferally at her, she turned away with a red face and moved to her vanity to collect her brush. “We’re going to need to get you some other clothes. You’re going to have to wash your pants at some point.”

“I heard from Steiner and some of the villagers that new clothes are few and far between,” Zidane reminded her, glancing at her red face through the mirror, and his smile widened just a bit, “Besides, you don’t seem to mind how I look in your clothes. I can pull it off well, apparently.” Maybe not with that orange jumpsuit of hers though; his groin would just *die*.

“I suppose you would look cute in anything...” Garnet admitted, shaking her head. She tried to make it sound like she was teasing him back, but the way she acted when she initially saw him in his new outfit made Zidane think she was being entirely truthful about that statement...

It was then that Elizabeth knocked on the door, and Zidane pursed his lips when she walked in without even announcing herself. The two could have been in the middle of a heated make-out session and she probably wouldn't even think twice about barging in. It wasn't like this was her room or anything.

The two glanced at each other, and Elizabeth paused, unable to come up with a witty line for the first time since they met. “Of course,” she finally muttered, snorting at Zidane's feminine blouse before looking over at Garnet brushing her hair out.

“Eh, I think it makes me look debonair,” the genome said, picking at the ruffles on the sleeve with a smirk, “Like a swashbuckler, you know?”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Elizabeth snarked, immediately walking over to Garnet and drawing her hair back with a glance in the mirror. “Would you like it up today, or down?” She turned

ever so slightly to glance at Zidane with a scrunched face, essentially glaring the genome from the room. The young man knew when he wasn't wanted, and the moment he left the room, he was once again alone in the castle.

It was the first time he was just a little bored as he slipped past a few of Beatrix's squad; the last thing he wanted was to go find Steiner and see him running himself further into the ground, so he decided to keep away from the barracks for the time being. He wandered over towards the kitchen, easily dodging the onionmeister as he charged out of the dining room with a huge shopping list trailing behind him.

The kitchen was mostly empty aside from Mullenkedheim, who was, like usual, splayed out over the table and shoving last night's dry bread into his mouth. He had some butter next to him, and he had absolutely no trouble buttering up the bread above his head as he lay over the table. There he was, buttering the rock hard bread and stuffing it into his mouth with a loud crunch. Zidane almost winced; he wondered if Garnet had to fix a broken tooth once in a while with this guy's eating habits. "Yo, Mullen, what's up?" the genome asked.

Pluto Knight IX leapt into the air in fright and whirled to face him. “I swear I wasn’t eating anything! I was just...” He glanced at the buttered bread in one hand and the knife in the other. “I was... *buttering* all of the bread for the rest of the castle! You know me! Always helping people out!”

“You okay there?” Zidane asked. He had never seen the guy so skittish before, “What’s got you all worked up?”

“...You mean a ghost girl isn’t going to leap out of the ceiling and try to eat my soul?” the knight asked. When he was met with an incredulous look, he shrugged and began crunching again, returning to relative normalcy.

Zidane was about to continue the “conversation”, but he was interrupted when he heard the familiar clank of his good pal. He turned slightly to watch Steiner enter the dining room, and the captain immediately set to berating his subordinate. “Mullenkedheim! I should have known you’d be skulking about here! Why aren’t you in the library!? You’re supposed to be helping Doctor Tot with his unpacking!!”

Zidane perked up immediately, his tail flicking happily at the captain’s annoyed shouting, and he

smiled brightly. “Look at you, Rusty! All bright and full of vigor! I knew you’d feel better if Beatrix dragged you off for a booty-call!”

Mullenkedheim spewed crumbs all over the floor and proceeded to choke on the rest as Steiner sputtered madly, his face a lovely shade of red. “H-h-h-how *dare* you! My personal life is just that, you frilly monkey! Where the hell did you even get that stupid thing!?”

Zidane picked at the hem of his blouse once again with a shrug, “Dagger gave it to me. I think I can pull it off though, don’t you think?”

Steiner sighed as Mullenkedheim collapsed under the table, still hacking. “You’re lucky Quina even lets you eat whatever you want here! Of *course* the one thing they haven’t learned yet is *earning* one’s meal!” Zidane silently noted that the captain didn’t say the genome *couldn’t* pull it off, and instantly assumed he was trying to avoid admitting he looked awesome as hell. He watched as Steiner continued to ineffectually berate his subordinate, but before the guy could literally pop a blood vessel, the captain turned back to the genome and waved a gauntlet at him, “And you, Zidane! You obviously have nothing

better to do except bother my men; why don't *you* help Doctor Tot with his unpacking?"

Zidane shrugged in response, his head kind of ringing from the screaming. It'd do him well to find some quieter things to do after that early "wake-up call", "Sure, whatever. Haven't had a chance to talk to him since I arrived anyway." He didn't even know the giant-beaked doctor was even in the city; last he heard the guy had that observatory-turned-studio in Treno. Oh well, it wouldn't do good to just sit there wondering about the good doctor's business, he might as well go meet the guy in the library and keep Steiner from exploding.

The genome jogged from the room and headed downstairs towards the library. He remembered there being two, but he only really knew one of them with certainty. It was the one where he exorcised a demon in a book, and he remembered Eiko mentioning that Ifrit used to do that very same thing by burning any possessed books with his holy flame. Man... no wonder Garnet was so intent on learning about the Summoner Tribe, their myths were *hardcore*.

When Zidane arrived in the library, he found that the place was mostly empty. There was what

appeared to be a scholar in one of the corners of the library, reading off a tome about the first excursions to the Outer Continent, and what appeared to be a Pluto Knight hiding in another corner, jotting down something in a manuscript of his own. However, there was no Doctor Tot to be seen, and the genome's tail swept along the bookcases as he walked through. Maybe the doctor was in the other one on the other side of the main hall? To be fair, it wasn't like Steiner said anything about which one, and it was always weird that there were two libraries in the first place. Maybe one side had histories while the other side had plays?

Whatever it was, Zidane didn't have time to ponder it further, as at that moment, he heard the squeak of both wheels and feet as the doctor walked a small cart full of boxes and other assorted knickknacks. The genome immediately realized why Steiner assumed he'd need help: that was a lot more stuff than he assumed a little guy could have, although the one time he was in the doctor's observatory, it was an absolute mess. he was a definite packrat, no doubt. "Woah there, doc!" Zidane called, hopping up to the tiny man and waving him down. "You need any help with all of that? Where're you takin' it anyway?"

“Oh! Zidane, was it?” Doctor Tot asked, adjusting his glasses and peering up at the genome, just to make sure he did indeed get the right person before continuing, ‘Queen Garnet has asked me to return to the castle as an adviser, so I must move some of my things back to my old room up on the third floor.’ Zidane looked at all of the boxes, and his tail instinctively drooped at the thought of the hike. “Yes, I’m sure that everyone has made that face since hearing the news.” The good doctor chuckled and reached out to take one of the smallest boxes on the top of the pile, “Well, you needn’t worry. I can handle all of this myself.”

“Yeah, in like half a day,” Zidane replied, picking up a pile of three and walking alongside Doctor Tot. “Eh, these aren’t as heavy as I thought they’d be.”

“The ones on the top are the lightest, of course, but your help is appreciated,” Dr. Tot replied as they walked past the dining room, where they heard Steiner continue to yell at a possibly oblivious Mullenkedheim. ‘Ahaha, some things never change,’ the doctor said as they walked past the dining room and the shouting got quieter as they left, “I remember hearing Master Steiner yelling at Lady Beatrix nonstop. Beatrix never replied with as much vitriol, but neither could see eye-to-eye until very

recently.” And even then... The doctor adjusted his box for a second so he could push his glasses up his giant nose, and he continued onward, “And here you are, helping an old man move into the castle, just like your predecessor!”

Zidane blinked, looking down at the doctor with a confused look as they began ascending the next flight of stairs. “There was another sexy-as-hell monkey-man boy-toy wandering the castle?” That raised so many questions about Brahne’s and Kuja’s relationship.

Doctor Tot let out a jovial chuckle as he realized where Zidane’s mind was flitting off to, and he turned slightly to the genome, “No, of course not. I’m talking about Nathan, Queen Brahne’s husband. He was Alexandria’s most recent Prince Consort.”

Zidane froze as Doctor Tot continued to toddle up the stairs unabated. *Prince?* He and Garnet hadn’t even talked about their plans past screwing around (quite literally) and this guy was already calling him a prince!? Shaking his head out, he followed after the now smirking doctor and asked for more info, “His name was Nathan? That’s Dagger’s dad, right?”

“Queen Garnet’s father was quite the wild buck in his youth,” Doctor Tot replied, knowing that Zidane’s real question was more in-depth than that, “He was a smart young lad, and he had many different suitors. Alas, their hearts were broken; he claimed his greatest love was Alexandria itself.”

“Sounds like he just didn’t go for rich girls,” Zidane said with a shrug, “I bet he didn’t mind slumming it with the poor. That does raise a question though...” The two arrived at Doctor Tot’s new room at that point, and after Zidane pushed it open with his foot, the two entered and placed their boxes on the floor. The genome flopped in a chair with a sigh and looked over at the short man, “So wait, how’d he get set up with Brahne anyway? Aside from, well, marrying a *queen* and all.”

“Aha— well, that was Her Majesty showing her intelligence and quick wit,” Doctor Tot replied, settling down in the chair next to Zidane and steepling his fingers. His mustache turned upwards, showing that there was a smile under the bushy mess, “She told Master Nathan that marrying her was basically marrying Alexandria, his ‘greatest love’. There wasn’t much he could say to that, and he agreed to the union.”

Zidane chuckled brightly and shrugged, but Doctor Tot was in full reminiscence mode, and he let out a deep, wistful sigh as he remembered the times that were, “But they truly did love each other, if not at the beginning, then further down the road. And they loved Garnet too. Ah, the uhm...” The air became a little thicker as Tot gulped down a bit of bile, “...The first Princess Garnet. Queen Brahne was inconsolable when she died; I’m unsure how she could have gone on if it weren’t for the little girl who came into the harbor that stormy night.”

Zidane’s lips moved on their own as he remembered the letter they found in Madain Sari, “It was Sarah. Dagger...”

“Indeed, the little Summoner. It was Master Nathan’s idea to replace her with his daughter. Queen Brahne at first showed little love towards her new daughter, but when she saw her husband caring for her as if she were born from his seed... well, it was hard to deny that he loved with great devotion, to Alexandria and to Princess Garnet, and Her Majesty soon learned to love Princess Garnet the same way Master Nathan learned to love her.” The doctor removed his glasses and pulled out a kerchief to wipe them down, and the next words he said were as heavy as the topic they shared. “There is a saying

here in Alexandria, ‘The Queen may be the Law of Alexandria, but it is her Prince Consort that is its Heart’.”

Zidane looked down at his hands in his lap; he hadn’t realized he was clenching them together so tightly until then. The Queen’s husband, the Prince Consort. He was the “Heart” of Alexandria, someone the people could love and who would love them back unconditionally. There must have been a reason Brahne chose Nathan in the first place...

...Was there a reason Garnet chose him...? “I don’t know if I can fill such big shoes,” Zidane said truthfully. He liked the people of Alexandria, sure, but being their *heart*? It was a tall order, and the genome wasn’t sure that he had what it took to be a father to an entire kingdom.

Doctor Tot let out a hum of agreement as he placed his glasses back on his giant nose, and he turned to smile at the thinking man. With a huff, the good doctor rose and placed an old hand on the genome’s knee. “Take your time, Zidane. At least now you know what is expected of you; I’m sure you’ll come to the right decision, both for you and for Queen Garnet.”

Zidane nodded, but he didn't respond beyond that, and Doctor Tot moved back to continue his unpacking. He knew that the genome would come and help him when he was done unpacking his own thoughts.

9. The Chill Wind

While Zidane helped Doctor Tot unpack in the castle, Garnet sat in her throne room, trying not to look as intense as she felt as she listened to a contractor list off where their supplies were going for the city's restoration. "At this point, I would hazard to say that we are moving swiftly with the rebuilding effort, although our lumber situation is woefully low. How goes the production in Zamo Basin?"

"Things are going smoothly," the queen replied, holding her hand out. Beatrix, who had been standing at her side the whole time, handed off a clipboard, and the queen immediately set to perusing it. "The townspeople have been using everything for their own houses first, and, let's be honest, they deserve to have their homes built first as they're the ones who are providing such a necessary resource."

The contractor was used to building mansions for Trenoians, and he was unsure how to respond to that. "Ah, yes, of course. I just pray that they will be able to send more supplies our way a little quicker. It won't matter how happy your citizens are to rebuild

their homes if there is nothing for them to build with.”

Garnet nodded and checked over the roster of people who had volunteered to live in the new settlement, and a smile twitched at the edge of her lips when she read a few familiar names on the list. “We have plenty of hard working people who wish to use this as an opportunity to start a new life.” If they played their cards right, the people in the slums of Treno would find work in the industrious village of Zamo Basin and beyond. All they really needed at this point was Freya’s reply...

“Kupo, kupo! Queen Garnet, there’s a letter!” a familiar squeak proclaimed as a furry mole-bat flew into the meeting hall with a shout. Mosh the moogle flew into the hall with a call, but he was halted by Beatrix’s warning glare.

“Mosh, I care not how important it is! You will announce yourself properly before you enter Her Majesty’s presence!” the holy knight ordered, her tone brooking no room for argument, and the moogle halted in the air, fluttering in the sky just before lightly floating to the ground, “What in the world could you possibly need with the queen anyway?”

Mosh whimpered lightly and lifted his letters, “I got two of them! Artemicion gave me two letters from Freya and Regent Cid! Let’s read them together, kupo!”

“Are you *kidding* me right now,” the contractor huffed as Mosh opened the one from Atla. He turned to Garnet with a frown, “You can’t honestly tell me that you’re going to listen to thi—” but he stopped when he saw that the queen had immediately sat up in her chair and looked much more alert. How could she ignore such an important part of her city’s restoration to listen to letters from *moogles* of all things!?

Mosh cleared his throat as Beatrix crossed her arms, and the moogle began:

“From Freya to Queen Garnet;

I hope this missive finds you well. We received your letter, and after careful consideration, His Majesty has decided to let Lindblum take on Beatrix’s trial, provided the Regent accepts your request as well.

In other news, I spoke to some of the Cleyran Geomancers, and a particularly adventurous one admitted to wanting to see more of the world. Miss

Raine will be arriving in Zamo Basin as soon as she can. Sending an announcement to the village will most likely help her acclimate to her new surroundings quickly.

Already I am missing the time we spent together; let us find some time to go on another adventure.”

Garnet looked up at Beatrix, her eyes bright, and the general let out a sigh that spoke volumes. “I suppose we know what’s in the second letter then, hmm?” she asked as Mosh opened the second one.

“Ahem! From Regent Cid to Queen Garnet;

I have received your letter, and the letter from Burmecia, and find that your request is acceptable. Perhaps this shall bring closure to all of our nations and shall relieve the tension we have shared during this time.

I have already begun the preparations to bring the Hilda Garde 4 to Alexandria with a small contingent of soldiers, with direct orders to see General Beatrix safely to Lindblum. Please do not hesitate to allow others to join the general on this trip; I know you would prefer to have some personal guards watching out for her.

As well, please do find an appropriate defense. I am unsure if anyone here in Lindblum would be able to do so without prejudice.”

Beatrix stood frozen in place at that last line, but that didn't stop Garnet from looking slightly giddy at the news. “Did you hear, Beatrix? They've agreed! It's all working out the way we planned! Do you know what this means?”

“It means that I will be leaving soon...” the general replied without a hint of joy. It halted Garnet's happy question, and the queen saw the hurt and fear in her general's eye. “...and that I may not return.” She was conflicted; she wanted it to be over as soon as possible, but she also wished to prolong everything as long as she could. Both she and Steiner had gotten so much closer, and for a moment she wished that they could have some time to spend together before she was sent away from him, perhaps forever....Hahah... That would teach her for hoping for even one nice thing, like spending time with her loved ones before the end.

She reached up and touched just under her eye, and found that her finger came away wet. Ah... Dearest Bert... how would he react to the news...?

The entire castle went into high alert once news reached the rest of the soldiers, and soon every worker and guard was running around, preparing for the arrival of the Hilda Garde 4. Beatrix knew that, had the news come only a day before, she would have become reclusive and shut her heart away from her lover... but she had learned very recently that separating the two of them would only hurt them more. Instead, she threw herself into her work during the day, ensuring that the castle would run smoothly if she did not return from the trial, and during the night she spent her time in her lover's arms.

It was their final night together, and the two held onto each other after their last bout of passion, both too tired and sweaty to do anything but clutch one another and weep silently. Beatrix had spent the last two weeks finally being able to truly open up to Steiner fully, and now she felt she could finally say what was truly on her mind. "Oh Bert, I don't want to go," she admitted fully, her tears falling onto his bare chest as she lay atop and clung to him, 'I don't want to leave you.' It wasn't until that moment, the one when she realized she may never see him again after tomorrow, that she was truly afraid to leave. "I... I want to run," she said, truthfully, "to run away

with you, justice be damned.” For how “just” could any person who would so thoroughly kill her lover’s happiness *be...*?

Steiner held Beatrix’s sobbing form as tightly and resolutely as he could, his face as stony as the general’s usually was. For so long she would kiss away his fears and remind him after his nightmares that a chimera hadn’t bitten Garnet straight in two, that Vivi didn’t resent them for dragging him around on a dangerous adventure for a good portion of what little time he had on Gaia, and that the captain had made the right decision to let Zidane go back on his own to the Iifa Tree instead of dragging him back with them by the ear, despite the two years of their queen’s depression.

She had been there to be his rock when he could not handle the stress, and now it was his turn to do the same as he rubbed her back and let her hold him so hard her nails threatened to break his skin. He kissed her forehead and she let out a frustrated growl. “I hate that I am so scared!” she confided, laying her head on its side so she could hear his steady, rhythmic heartbeat as hers raged, “I have spent this whole time accepting this, and it is *now* that I am having second thoughts!? It is asinine!”

“It is normal,” Steiner replied, his voice coming in her ears from both the air and the rumble in his chest. “I-I am pleased you would not wish to throw your life away so readily.”

Beatrix stared at the wall, her emotional state too turbulent to even move. “And yet I already am. This trial...”

“...Will be fine,” Steiner said firmly, almost forcefully, “You are an honorable woman who saw the wrongs she had done and worked to right them. You are not anything like those who abuse their rank or power.” He squeezed her reassuringly, and she tensed a moment before relaxing into his touch, “You, of all people, deserve forgiveness.”

Beatrix went quiet at that point, melting into his touch and considering the soft words he gave her. She couldn’t be sure that he was saying that because he believed it, or because he was trying to keep himself from breaking down like she was.

...His strong, protective arm around her shoulders told her the answer, and she began to believe it too...

“I wish you could come with us,” Beatrix said, changing the subject, “But I can’t let Queen Garnet

lose the both of us in the same day.”

“You needn’t worry. Breireicht will be joining you,” Steiner replied, looking up at the ceiling as they talked lightly with each other, “He may be athletically challenged, but he has the most curious ability to make people listen to him. I have no doubt he will find a way to help others understand your plight.”

Not worrying was easier said than done, although Beatrix was sure that the moment they were out of each others’ arms and she was whisked away on the Hilda Garde 4, her Bert would become a sobbing mess. He was doing his best to keep from breaking down; he was being her rock this night....She felt her heart swelling with love and pride for her lover.

She closed her eye and let out a deep, tired sigh. “I just want this to be over as soon as possible, so I can be back with you.”

Steiner kissed her on top of her head with a grunt of affirmation, but he gave no other response.... There was no other response that she needed.

Garnet, meanwhile, paced softly in her room, her brow furrowed so deeply that Zidane felt more troubled than he probably should. He padded up to her silently and halted her pacing by wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing her shoulder. “Hey, hey, Dagger, it’s okay. It’ll be...”...He wanted to say that it would all be okay, that Beatrix would return in only a few days, and yet... he couldn’t assume she would be fine. They couldn’t have assumed *he* would have returned safely from the Iifa Tree... “Hey, Cid was going to let you send a small group of knights with Beatrix to Lindblum, right? Send me, too.”

Garnet halted, her hand raised to touch the genome’s cheek, her eyes wide, “You... want to leave...? You want to go back to Lindblum?”

“Not for long,” Zidane assured her, reaching up to hold her hand. He nodded and cocked his head with a smile, ‘You can’t send Steiner with her, right? You need him here at the castle. I’ll watch out for Beatrix for him and you.’ There were plenty of people, angry people, who were still incensed at the atrocities that Brahne unleashed upon the world, and Beatrix was the last person they could “morally” take their rage out on. An assassination attempt

wasn't out of the question, and protecting his friends was something he *knew* how to do.

Garnet closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She reached up to grasp Zidane's full locks and hold him still so she could take a deep whiff of his scent. "Zidane, I-I don't know if I can handle being without you..."

"Hey, hey, Dagger, come on," Zidane said, a chuckle in his voice, "You already did. You were so strong, for these past years. And this time you *know* I'll be back. It's not like we're going off to war; I'll be back, I..." He almost halted, but he shook his head and smiled brightly at her with all the love in the world, "I *promise* I'll be back."

Garnet struggled to find words to refuse him, and yet, in his eyes she found no hint of a lie. She breathed his scent in just once more, wishing to remember it for the next few days that he'd be away.

Zidane held her tight as the queen nodded softly, giving in to his request reluctantly. "Please," she said as they sat down on her bed, "Take care of Beatrix for us. I know you can. You saved the *world*. Surely you can save..." Her words caught in her throat when she noted the genome's expression

change, and he looked away suddenly, unable to look at her.

“It was everyone in Memoria who stopped the darkness at the end...” Zidane said quickly, gulping a wad of bile. It was his friends who saved the world... Zidane couldn’t even save his *brother*. “I... I can’t make any promises about Beatrix, but I’ll do my best.” He was from Lindblum; he might know something that the Alexandrians sent with Beatrix might need to know. He would do his best until the last, for Garnet, for Steiner, even for Beatrix.

The day had arrived that the Hilda Garde 4 would land in Alexandria, and Zidane watched as, once again, the entire castle was abuzz. The genome stayed close to Garnet throughout the whole ordeal, as the queen wished him to be close to her as long as possible, and he couldn’t deny her that last request.

The highest elite in Alexandria stood together in the castle courtyard, Garnet and Zidane, along with Captain Steiner, Beatrix and her lieutenant general, Gina. Standing behind the lieutenant general were the soldiers chosen to accompany Beatrix to Lindblum: Pluto Knights V and VI, Dojebon and

Breireicht, as well as two from Beatrix's Squad, Jasmine and Nicole.

Beatrix felt naked without Save the Queen at her side, and she smoothed out the petticoat she was wearing. Her dress and bodice were clothing articles she would normally shun, but Gina had rightfully said that she should try to look as unassuming and quaint as possible. If anything, it might get a bit of pity out of whatever judge presided over the trial. They'd need all the help they could get at that point...

The airship touched down as the Alexandrians waited with baited breath, and Garnet grasped at her dress to keep the wind from playing with it too much. Steiner grabbed at Beatrix's hand, and she squeezed it tight in reply, her heart hammering in her chest. The ramp was extended and two Lindblum soldiers saluted their captain...

...And Eiko appeared on said ramp. She practically sailed down and into Garnet's confused but waiting arms. "Dagger! When father told me he'd be sending people to Alexandria, I just *had* to go visit you for a bit!"

Garnet gave a confused cough as Eiko knocked the wind out of her, but she couldn't help but feel

overjoyed that Eiko took the time to visit, even in this dire circumstance. “Oh Eiko, I’m so happy to see you too. Thank you for coming out all this way,” the queen replied, hugging the princess back.

Zidane reached out to fluff out the princess’s purple hair, but it was at that moment that the true “captain” had arrived, and everyone looked up at the person in charge of the Hilda Garde...

...And the genome squinted at the boy that stood regally at the top of the ramp. He was older than Eiko, obviously, but he was still just a teenager, still set to have a few growth spurts and wearing makeup to hide his obvious teenage acne. He was still a boy, and they put *him* in charge of bringing Beatrix to Lindblum?

Despite his youth, he carried himself as one who was trained to lead, and he wore an outfit similar to Regent Cid’s, complete with cape and tights. “Princess Eiko, please,” the boy said in a tone that showed he had studied public speaking for many years previously, ‘It matters little if you are good friends with the Grand Queen of Alexandria; you are representing a country and must conduct yourself appropriately in front of such distinguished people.’ The boy regarded each of the Alexandrian

dignitaries before bowing low and descending the ramp. “Your Grace, Queen of Alexandria, allow me to introduce myself; my name is Lord Scott Kashuan, the patriarch of the Kashuan family.” He finally set foot on solid ground, and the teenager approached the queen before bowing once more with a flourish of his cape. Eiko *groaned* in exasperation.

“No one even *cares* except for you, Scott! Everyone here knows how to let loose once in a while, and you’re such a wet blanket that you didn’t even learn how to say ‘hi’ to your best friends! Do you even *have* friends!?”

“I have plenty of friends, thank you very much,” Scott replied, his stoic frown reminding Zidane of someone as the teenager continued, ‘I just do not *hug* them in public.’ Or ever, really. The young lordling waved his cousin off dismissively when she stuck her tongue out at him, “Regardless, do what you will, I am not here to babysit you.” Kashuan’s lord turned to appraise Beatrix as Garnet held Eiko back to keep her from bludgeoning her cousin in the head. “General Beatrix, I take it? I must admit, I expected someone... grander.”

Steiner let out a rumble in his throat, but Beatrix squeezed his hand and regarded the lordling appropriately, “If you honestly believe that I have a better chance of finishing this trial intact if I were dressed as if I were going to war, then by all means, allow me a moment to get changed.”

Scott’s smirk was half-baked, as if he recognized the dig and was fighting to keep from getting offended, “Aha— I see your point. I have heard a lot about you, Lady Beatrix. You are a calm and capable woman, and yet you are still a criminal according to Lindblum. You have the right to a fair trial, but we must cuff you while you are on the Hilda Garde, as it is technically Lindblum soil. It is my brother, Gordon, who will—” Scott paused and turned to gesture at the air. Eiko snorted with laughter and Zidane coughed as the young lord broke into a sweat, his calm persona cracking under pressure.

Scott whirled around and scanned the airship. “Where in the world is Gordon!?” he called up at the other guards, “Wasn’t he *just* by my side when we touched down!?” Did his simpering sibling run off *again* !?

Scott crossed his arms from both anger and embarrassment as the Lindblum guards rushed off to

collect the lord's brother. The young Kashuan tapped his foot and took a deep breath, counting back from ten and *willing* himself not to care about how everyone's eyes were boring into him, judging him and his incompetence. It was especially hard to ignore Eiko, who was actually snorting out loud in laughter, despite Garnet's attempts to keep the child at bay.

Finally, one of the guards came forward, dragging along a stringy, bean-like teen with long, blond hair drawn back into a ponytail, just like Scott's hairstyle. It was very obvious from the way he looked that he was related to Lord Scott, although he carried himself much differently as he stumbled down the ramp, mumbling something under his breath and nearly tripping over his two feet.

"My-my apologies for the wait," Scott said, turning back to Garnet and attempting to salvage the diplomatic expedition, 'This *child* is my younger brother, Gordon Kashuan,' he glared pointedly at Gordon, who flinched under the glower. The two brothers didn't seem to be that far apart in age, but it was clear who held the power in their family, just from their mannerisms. "As you can see, he is still inexperienced in the ways of diplomacy. I wish only to train him up to something befitting..."

Zidane noted that the other teenager's shoulders were hunched, and the younger Kashuan found peoples' legs and feet a lot more interesting, as he couldn't meet anyone in the eyes. The genome's heart instantly went out to Gordon as Scott berated him in front of the Alexandrian dignitaries, and he spoke up with a loud, brash voice, "That's all well and good, Scott, but does that really have anything to do with Beatrix?"

Scott froze, as he just realized he had been monologing for far too long, and he nodded furiously at Zidane, his face still dark red from embarrassment. "Y-You are right. I will watch my tongue from now on, my lord." He then whipped around to look at his brother, who couldn't meet his brother's gaze and instead stared at his boots, "Come, we have business to attend to."

"...D-don't know why you e-even needed me..." Gordon muttered under his breath, taking the iron cuffs up in his hands and approaching Beatrix with a trembling gait.

"We'll talk about it *later!*" Scott hissed in response, feeling unbearably hot from all of the eyes on him, judging him and his inability to handle everything. First Eiko backtalked to him on his first

real diplomatic mission outside of Lindblum, and now *Gordon* as well!? Might as well just jam the knife right into his future as a dignitary right *there*!

The awkward air never left as Gordon approached Beatrix, his stride fearful; it was obvious he knew the stories about the general of Alexandria, and she was the last person the young teenager wanted to cross. “Ahh, G-General Beatrix. By the r-rights vested in me as a n-noble of Kashuan and c-caregiver of Gizamaluke Grotto, I h-hereby place you under arrest for crimes... a-against the C-Crown of Burmecia...”

Steiner and Beatrix exchanged one last, longing glance at each other, and yet, Steiner still could not bear to release his lover... “Steiner,” the general said decisively, looking him straight in the eye, “If I do not return, I beg of you, do not mourn forever. I would wish for you to move on.”

The captain’s hand trembled in hers as he fought to keep from lifting her into his arms and fighting off anyone who dared take her from him... “Know that no matter what happens, even after I finish my mourning, that I will always love you. Now and forever.”

Beatrix's smile was so happy, so relieved, that the two could finally release each other, their hands lingering in the air for a moment, as if reaching out for the other... before Scott coughed and Gordon jumped, nearly dropping the cuffs he was holding. He caught them with his left hand before walking forward and staring at Beatrix's outstretched hands, her poise submitting to the arrest. Even then, Gordon could barely go through with the act. "I-I am so sorry, General Beatrix..." he whispered softly, claspng the woman in irons before whirling around and retreating to his brother's side, his eyes staring fervently at the grass.

Scott huffed in relief and placed his hands behind his back. That-that wasn't so hard! Uncle Cid would definitely come to see how far he had gone in his studies! "Well then, General Beatrix, come along, your contingent may accompany you, as well." He looked at the guards who stood at attention (aside from Dojebon, who was getting antsy and bounced in place) and bowed low, "You shall be treated as our most esteemed guests while we travel. Let us make haste; if we hurry we can make it back to Lindblum by the evening and get some dinner at the castle."

Eiko huffed, but didn't like the prospect of eating in the air; she turned to Garnet and sighed, "I wish we coulda talked some more..."

"There will be time for that another time," Garnet said, dropping down to smile at her friend, "And besides, Zidane'll be coming along with you. Take good care of him for me, okay?" She raised her pinkie for a promise, and Lindblum's princess let out a shout.

"Zidane's coming too!?" She glanced at a shrugging Zidane before turning back to Garnet and raising her hand. The two shared a pinkie promise before she rushed to hug the genome. "Finally we can go on our date!"

Garnet's smile never left, but her jealousy streak kicked in just enough for her to remind the princess that it was "*yourplay date*."

Scott coughed loudly to remind them of his presence, and Eiko let out a groan, "Al-right, Scott, we're *coming*!" she hissed, releasing her friend, waving at Garnet, and trotting over to Beatrix's side as Jasmine moved to help the general walk up the ramp onto the Hilda Garde 4.

Scott urged Gordon to follow the Alexandrians on board with a hard glance in his brother's direction, and the younger Kashuan nearly fell over himself rushing up the ramp behind the Pluto Knights. The lordling then turned around and bowed before Alexandria's queen as Steiner clanked to her side. "I will take care of your general, Queen Garnet, I swear on my honor as Lord of Kashuan." At least, until the end of the trial, but the young lord assumed that was a given.

Garnet drew her dress into her fists, and she dipped low before the teenager in a deep curtsy. "We are in your debt, Lord Kashuan. May the Sunfire ever light your way through the dark."

Scott started for a second; he apparently didn't suspect that she would be knowledgeable about his family's history. He recovered quickly, however, and bowed deeply in response, "May it shine light on this trial and let true justice be served." He then rose, drew his cape the way he had seen his uncle do so, and moved to board the airship.

Steiner watched as the Hilda Garde 4 rose into the sky, and he peered to watch for even a hint of Beatrix at the side of the bow. Scott had probably immediately sent her away to the brig, however, and

the captain's heart sank as the airship pulled away from Alexandria castle.

Garnet turned lightly and placed a hand on the back of the captain's gauntlet, but he didn't even notice her gesture, so intent was he to see Beatrix just one more time...

Beatrix was right. The moment the airship reached South Gate, Steiner choked on a sob and quickly excused himself. The queen wished there was something she could do, and she felt like a helpless teenager once again as she watched her friend briskly clank away.

She lowered herself to her knees and ran her fingers across the cobblestones of her destroyed castle, and she reviewed every moment of the past two years through her head, absolutely sure that there was nothing else she could have done to improve this situation.

...Then why did the chill wind cause her to shudder, as if Death had just passed by...?

10. Lindblum Grand Castle

The Alexandrians aboard the Hilda Garde felt a little out of their element. Nicole seemed to be jittery, and none of the Pluto Knights had ever left Alexandrian soil before (much to Dojebon's apparent chagrin), so everyone naturally gathered around Zidane, looking a little out of place and shifting on their feet. The genome's tail flicked as everyone stood near the brig within eye-shot of Beatrix, who sat silently in her cell and meditated on the land she left behind.

“So uhm...” Jasmine was the first to speak up, casting a sidelong glance at the Lindblum guards in the room. She turned back to the others and crossed her arms, “These Lindblum leaders aren't *all* kids, right? I mean, Princess Eiko I get, but they just put this airship under the command of some child. No offense, but what was the regent thinking?”

Zidane scratched at his cheek, a thoughtful snort coming from his person as he remembered Lindblum politics. “He said he was Kashuan's patriarch. Kashuan has been a noble family of the regency since Cid I. In fact, Lord Egil Kashuan was

Cid's rival during the Festival of the Hunt that started Lindblum proper. Not to mention, Hilda's a Kashuan too, by birth. Scott and Gordon are, quite literally, Cid's nephews."

"So that kid's essentially the regent's number two...?" Brereicht murmured aloud, rubbing his lip in thought. Zidane hadn't considered that, but the moment the Pluto Knight said it aloud, the genome realized that Scott might have, at one point, been Cid's heir. No wonder he had been groomed so for public office. Zidane's tail swished when he realized that Eiko's adoption had pulled the rug out from everyone's plans to have Scott be the next regent, and he tried not to let his agitation and worry show as Dojebon brought up the next point.

"But if he's the *patriarch*, that must mean that his parents aren't around, right?" Pluto Knight V asked, putting his hands on his hips and bouncing on his heels, "So what does that mean really?"

"Aha, so that's where you Alexandrians are." Everyone turned and watched as Scott entered the room and glanced at his guests with a confused cock of his head. "Princess Eiko has been looking for you. Why are you all gathered in *here* of all places?"

Everyone glanced at each other, but it was Nicole who spoke up first. “My apologies, Lord Scott. We’re just... well, *I’m* worried for General Beatrix, is all. I think we all are.”

Scott nodded sagely (or, at least as sagely as he could manage, being a teenager), “I understand, this is a very troubling time for all of you. Now, I think I heard you had a question for me? Something about my parents?” He bowed bow before rising again, “I aim to assist you in any way possible.”

Zidane glanced at Dojebon, who shrugged and turned to the lordling. “You mentioned you were Kashuan’s patriarch, but that would mean you’re the oldest in the family, right?”

“Aha, you noticed that,” Scott replied, smiling in a genteel fashion with a slightly cocked head. ‘Kashuan Keep lies in the Aerb Mountain Plateaus, but our land is near Gizamaluke Grotto, and we have very close ties to the Burmecians, both back when we were at war with them and now that we’re at peace. Father even learned the ways of the Dragon Knights from them as a gesture of goodwill; you could say that the Kashuan family is half Burmecian.’ He let out a chuckle at his joke, but when he noted that no one else was laughing, he

coughed and continued, “But that also means that if the grotto is ever attacked, we are tasked with protecting it, both to assist our allies and to protect Lindblum. When Alexandria used their black mages to attack Gizamaluke, Father left us to fight...” He halted, his eyes getting a far-away look.

...And the teenager looked across the way to look at Beatrix, who hadn’t moved an inch since he arrived. “Uncle Cid wishes to help the general, so I will assist her as well.” His heart hardened lightly when he remembered the atrocities of the black mages, and he clenched his fist. “...I just cannot understand why.” The lordling turned back and nodded at the Alexandrians. “I just want peace, and if this trial brings that, then I will do all I can.”

“Then we share the same goal, Lord Kashuan,” Beatrix said suddenly, speaking her first words since being placed in her cell. Her eye fluttered open and it met the teenager’s wavering gaze, “I will do whatever I can to bring peace to this continent, and the world. If my death is what’s needed to do so, I will go gracefully to the end.”

Kashuan’s lord trembled, and he turned away to look up at the Alexandrian guards, who snapped to attention the moment their general spoke. The

determination and resolution from Beatrix's gaze was reflected in her peoples' faces, and at that moment, the lordling finally realized why the general was so well loved. "...Then..." he began, gulping to wet his dry throat as he turned back to meet Beatrix's gaze with his own determination shining through, "I pray to the Sunfire that it does not come to that."

He bowed low once again, but the way he drew his cape to leave the brig, he looked less like a boy playing at a lord and more like a young man who wished to reflect on the words that he shared with those kind people....He seemed to be at odds with himself as he passed by his guards and slipped away to his quarters.

Jasmine clucked her tongue and crossed her arms, turning to Zidane with a fine pout. "I don't really get him. He's just a boy, I know, but he speaks as if he knows everything there is to know."

Zidane shrugged. "I may know about the Kashuans, growing up in Lindblum, but I don't know *the* Kashuans. I was stealing from King's mansion instead; he had a lot more treasure of *actual* value, if you catch my meaning."

“Oh dude, that’s right!” Dojebon said, slapping Breireicht away to charge next to Zidane, “You’re some awesome thief-dude, right!? You musta traveled all over the place, well, I mean, you *did* see the world with Her Majesty (*Nice*, by the way, am I right?), but you gotta tell me a bunch about all the cool things you did before you met her! She only told us stories about her adventures with you and the captain.”

Everyone turned to look at Zidane (although Breireicht pursed his lips at the thought of the genome’s unlawful excursions), and he shrugged with a bright smirk. “Well, I suppose I can spare a tale or two before we arrive at the Grand Castle. How about the one time my brothers and I did a heist near the mines; there was this really nasty cartel that was using its power to create a monopoly on iron, and let me tell you, you do *not* want to get on the wrong side of the Lindblum Cartel, that is, unless you’re a member of Tantalus!”

Evening was beginning to end by the time the Hilda Garde 4 came to the Lindblum Grand Castle, and the Pluto Knights, as well as Jasmine, flocked to

the bow of the ship to look over the magnificent city. “It’s so amazing!!” Dojebon shouted.

“I never even imagined it could be so huge...” Breireicht admitted in awe. Zidane just laughed at them as they stared, mouths agape, and Jasmine looked up with a furrowed, questioning brow.

“Oh, sorry!” The genome said with a chuckle, crossing his arms, “You just sound a lot like Steiner when he first saw Lindblum. I didn’t think you guys would be just like your captain, but here you are!”

Jasmine crossed her arms, but she glanced across the way as Nicole and Beatrix (the general was still bound) approached from below. Nicole kept checking to see if her general could walk aboard a still moving airship when her hands were still cuffed, but Beatrix handled it with a grace that was only acquired through much practice aboard other flying ships.

She regarded her Alexandrian brethren with a comforting smile that squeezed Zidane’s heart. He didn’t know if he could give that same smile if he failed to help Beatrix... if he had to go back to Garnet and Steiner without her. Would he be able to give them a smile to set their souls at ease during the darkest parts of their lives? Was it even possible?

...How could he be their Heart when he couldn't even smile like Beatrix, to reassure everyone even at the end of it all...?

The Hilda Garde 4 arrived in its personal port, and it was only when it landed that Beatrix stumbled for a moment, although that was true for everyone except Zidane. No, *he* fell over because he was tackled from behind by Lindblum's princess, who was ecstatic to finally find him again. "Were you avoiding me, Zidane!? That wasn't very nice of you!"

Zidane grunted at her hug before turning and smiling at his friend, "Sorry, Eiko, but I wanted to watch out for the other Alexandrians. Why didn't you look for me?"

"I had to make sure Gordon didn't cry like a little baby." Eiko said, snorting a bit as she crossed her arms. Everyone turned as the plank was brought down, but the princess glanced over at the door to the brothers' room and looked up at Zidane, "He's nothing like you, Zidane, I should have just ignored him."

"Hey now," Zidane said, feeling almost sorry for that kid, "I bet he just needs a friend or two."

It was at that point that the door they were looking at opened, and out stepped Scott, looking just as regal (but perhaps a little less stiff) as when Zidane had first seen him. The Kashuan patriarch moved forward, gloved hands still behind his back as he inclined his head towards Beatrix. “Shall we go? Uncle Cid has prepared a guest room for you here in the castle.”

Nicole blinked. “Wait, you’re not going to take her to the dungeon?”

“Why would we?” the teenager asked, turning to face the guard. He rocked on the balls of his feet, trying to look a little taller before dropping back down, ‘Uncle Cid trusts you not to leave, and I feel that the general will be better protected up here instead of in a cell with people who might want her dead and are not above murdering those they don’t like.’ He pursed his lips, trying to find how to word his next sentence. “...I wish to trust you too. Please, show me that you’re worthy of it.”

The Alexandrians all nodded immediately, their faces as serious as they could muster, knowing just how much leeway Scott and the regent were giving them. “Of course, Lord Kashuan. We’ll comply with whatever is necessary.”

“But also check out this *sweet* castle!” Dojebon shouted, giving a holler as he jogged down the ramp and practically zoomed to talk to the engineers preparing their checkup on the recently docked airship. Scott pursed his lips, but regarded the others’ apologetic looks with a knowing smile. His gaze shifted to Eiko before he coughed and moved forward, leading the way.

As the group descended the ramp, they passed by a few engineers before looking up at the one person who was waiting for them all. He wasn’t recognizable by most of the members, but Zidane had a strange sense of *deja vu* right up until Nicole let out a shout. “Justin!” she called.

The former leader of the Lindblum resistance, the Vigilantes, held out his hands in welcome, “Hey there, Nicole.”

The guard looked up at Beatrix with shimmering eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered, “Thank you for letting me come.” The general smiled in response and closed her eyes before nodding, and Nicole dashed past Jasmine and into her beloved’s waiting arms. No one even said anything as Justin practically carried her off back to town so they could

catch up on everything they missed when they were away from each other.

“Do you think she’ll come back with us after all this is done?” Zidane asked as Scott led the way to the general’s ‘prison cell’, “I mean, that was the face of a woman who found what she was looking for in life.”

“There are some people who have to change course from their first profession,” Beatrix agreed, “I feel that we need more people willing to search for what truly makes them happy in this world. After all, we don’t have as much of a need for warriors anymore.”

Zidane shrugged and glanced over at Breireicht, who was fumbling with his armor and scratching at his more-salt-than-pepper hair, and the genome turned back to the general with a smile, “Besides, we’ve already got some great guardsmen, I think.”

Beatrix turned to smile at Zidane, “My thoughts exactly.”

The “cell” was a guest room similar to the one that Zidane stayed in during his adventures, with

four beds and a few desks. Pluto Knight VI immediately set to the task of claiming the desk as his own, and he dropped into the chair with what could only be called an ‘old man sigh’. Jasmine examined the city below with a whistle of appreciation, and Zidane sat on a banister on the second floor with Eiko, and the two watched as Scott removed Beatrix’s cuffs. When Beatrix was free of her bonds, the young man looked up into her sharp eye, the one that cut him straight through, and the Kashuan took a step back. “I don’t think I have to say that we’ll be keeping you under watch here twenty-four-seven. If you have need of anything, please have one of your men alert ours. Do you have any questions?”

Beatrix looked up at Zidane, and the genome’s tail swept along the banister in response. The general sighed good-naturedly before turning back to the Kashuan patriarch. “If I do, I’ll have my men ask yours.”

Scott recognized the joke, and his countenance brightened considerably. “That sounds perfect. Lady Eiko! Shall we go see Uncle? I’m sure you’re hungry for some dinner. Let’s go together.”

“I think I’ll stay here,” the princess said nonchalantly, glancing at Zidane with a swooning expression. Scott’s lips pursed in response as her eyes sparkled at the thought of spending time with her hero, “You’re going to feed everyone here anyway, right? Just bring another helping for me.”

The way Scott furrowed his brow showed that he didn’t like that answer very much, but after counting back from five, he took a deep breath and nodded cordially. “V-very well. You have fun with your friends. It’s been *far* too long since you’ve seen them, after all.”

“Did you just snark at me?” Eiko crowed in delight as Scott whirled around with a flourish of his cape, and he walked out as she shouted after him, ‘You did! I knew you had it in you!’ She elbowed Zidane in the rib with the proudest smirk he had ever seen from her, “I taught him that. I’m practically a teacher now!”

The genome chuckled as he watched the young Kashuan leave the room. “And one of the best around, at that.”

Dinner was served only a few moments after Scott's departure, and the guards, princess and general gathered around the several platters of duck, stew, gravy and diced vegetables. Dojebon had gotten lost in the castle, but the guards were smart to recognize that he was Alexandrian and pointed him to the guest room. "This place is insane! I bet you could fit three Alexandria Castles in here!" he announced as he tore off a duck leg and started munching down. "It took me like a half hour just to find my way back to you guys!"

"Then maybe next time, you won't run off without a guide," Jasmine muttered from a little ways away, 'Honestly, this is why you can't trust Alexandrian men to do anything useful.' She paused when everyone turned to stare at her, and she stuffed a few slices of cucumber in her mouth, "What?" she asked with a full mouth, "It's *true*."

Zidane rolled his eyes as Breireicht turned to the genome, "Perhaps I could put that to the test. As General Beatrix's attorney, it'll be my job to come up with a defense that will put her in a sympathetic light." He turned to Zidane, and both he and Eiko perked up when they noticed the Pluto Knight's attention was on them. "That's where you come in, Zidane."

“Oh man!” Pluto Knight V shouted, spewing duck all over the table as he did so, “This is some patented Breireicht going on right here! This is why they call you Pluto Knight VI!”

Breireicht turned to Dojebon, “I’m pretty sure the reason I’m called that is because your artillery mastery was more useful than my encyclopedic knowledge.”

“So wait,” Eiko asked, glancing around the room, “If you knights are numbered by how useful you are, then why is Steiner Pluto Knight I?” Dojebon opened his mouth before opening his eyes wide and giving Breireicht a look that pleaded with him to remind him just what that reason was.

Breireicht let out a sigh, his “encyclopedic knowledge” coming out once again, ‘Well, it’s because his swordsmanship is second to none among the men in Alexandria. Especially now that he has mastered the ancient art of the Knight Sword.’ Coming back from Memoria with the strength to fell *The-Desire-For-Death Itself* probably helped widen the gap a bit as well. Pluto Knight VI shook his head and turned to Zidane, hoping to change the subject before he let it sink in that Alexandria had four of the nine Mortal Weapons of Mass Destruction

calling its lands home, “But that is neither here nor there. I have a question for you, Zidane. I’ll need to know as much as possible about the Lindblum Industrial Revolution.”

The genome blinked, his brows furrowed, “That was the time when Cid VIII was building his Mist Ships and stopping the war between Burmecia and Alexandria, right? Why are you asking me? I wasn’t even alive during that time. Hell, you probably know more than I do.” Zidane leaned on his knees and took a deep, almost wistful sigh. Once again, he was useless in helping his friends. He told Garnet he’d help Beatrix, and look after her for both the queen’s and Steiner’s sake, and yet here he was, being useless...

Zidane’s dejected sigh caused everyone else to look at each other worriedly, and although the genome didn’t notice it, they had all felt put off by his sudden unhappy demeanor. “Uh, not to be rude or anything,” Pluto Knight V said, turning to the genome, ‘But like, where’s the real Zidane? Queen Garnet would never stop talking about this amazing friend who helped everyone he met. Zidane was always a friend who found ways to help people, and he never gave up. He was the Heart of the group that led them all to the end.’ He turned to Eiko, who’s

eyes were shining as the memories flooded back, “Isn’t that right, your highness?”

Eiko nodded repeatedly before turning to Zidane, her eyes shining with adoration. “Yeah! Zidane was always there for us, and he’d never give up trying to figure out how to help everyone, even when Amarant or Steiner were getting on our nerves! He’s the best friend a girl can have!”

The genome smiled back at Eiko, her happiness was infectious, and he couldn’t help but smile in return....He had been worried for so long, whether or not he could be the Heart of a kingdom, but he hadn’t even thought about how he had already been the Heart of his party. They had been relying on him, and there was a time, what seemed like forever ago, that he had tried to leave them, to let them go on their own, and it was then that they became *his* Heart. They had all supported him when he needed it the most...

...Wait a minute! He had been so focused on being the sole Heart of Alexandria that he hadn’t even thought of the fact that everyone was there for *him* , as well! He didn’t need to be the only person people looked up to, because he had Garnet and the

others to rely on too! Why didn't he realize it before?

Zidane looked up at Dojebon, his eyes shining with a familiar wild sheen, "You know what, Number V? You're right! I don't even know what got into me!" He smiled at Eiko and turned back to Breireicht, "I've always been helping my friends out, and this shouldn't be any different! I'll do my best to help you guys out, no matter what!"

Eiko jumped up with a cheer, and even Jasmine's eyes shone with excited enthusiasm. "Yeah!" Lindblum's princess shouted, "Let's save Beatrix! This is the first time I've saved someone without actually beating someone up!"

"There's a first time for everything, don't you think, your highness?" Beatrix asked, her smile looking brighter than it had been since she arrived in Lindblum Grand Castle. Zidane glanced around the room, and he noticed that everyone had brightened up significantly. His speech had inspired everyone to push forward, like they had inspired him, and he suddenly felt a pang in his chest.

...Was that why Garnet chose him? Did she know he would be a good Heart for Alexandria?...Did she

truly wish for him to be her Prince Consort, like her father before him...?

...For the first time since he heard about the kind, beloved Prince Nathan, Zidane finally felt that he had what it took to be the man that Garnet needed for her country. All he had to do was *prove* it to himself.

11. Preparations

Zidane and Breireicht worked long into the night, long after Eiko was collected by the royal guards to be sent to bed, and long after Beatrix herself nearly passed out from exhaustion (thankfully they got her to the bed before she slumped forward in her chair). Jasmine tried to keep watch, especially when Dojebon fell asleep in a chair after talking her ear off, but even she was asleep by the time Breireicht rubbed at his sleepy eyes and smiled at the genome. “Thank you so much, that should be enough. Now, I’ll compile it with my own notes...”

“How does it look, Number VI?” Zidane asked, his usual spritely tail drooping to the floor. Even he was beginning want some sleep at that point, but he knew they both had to keep going for Beatrix’s sake, “Do you think you can get the general out of this?”

Breireicht let out a tired, belabored sigh, and he rubbed at his neck before cracking it, “One can never be certain; if Regent Cid was right, and no Lindblum citizen would take this case, then it’s going to be really hard to find a judge who is going to be entirely impartial. No matter how you swing it,

this isn't going to be easy..." He looked up at Zidane's pained face, and the Pluto Knight cocked his head with a smile, "But your assistance will prove invaluable; I know a little about Lindblum history, but not as much as a person who grew up here. I think I can use this for Lady Beatrix's trial. Thank you, Master Zidane."

The genome's tail flicked up and his smile brightened. "Just Zidane'll do. Even if I become Alexandria's sexiest and coolest prince in its history, I refuse to forget where I came from."

"Always remembering the little man, eh?" Pluto Knight VI said as he slowly rose, his joints cracking as they did, "Well then, I'm going to need to take a rest. Tomorrow, I'll compile everything and finish it up. Let's take a breather, shall we?"

Zidane nearly leaped up with a chuckle, "Yeah, it's been a long night. See you in the morning."

Technically, they saw each other in the afternoon, because Zidane slept in a lot longer than he expected. By the time the genome woke back up, he found the room entirely empty aside from Breireicht,

who had awoken earlier and immediately set to work.

Dojebon's disappearance was to be expected; the kid couldn't keep still, but Jasmine and Beatrix missing made the genome's heart skip a beat, and he whirled to slide down the banister and land next to Pluto Knight VI. "Yo Breireicht! Where's Beatrix and Jasmine? What happened to them!?"

The Pluto Knight looked up and rubbed at his sleepy eyes. "What do you mean?...Oh, right." He glanced at the door and turned back to Zidane, 'You needn't worry, a physician came by to collect General Beatrix. They need to make sure that she's healthy. No reason to put her on death row if she's going to die in a few months anyway.' Zidane's instinctive frown was met with a gentle smile. "I know, I know, it sounds morose, but I suppose it's just red tape, overall. I'm sure the general will be fine. I suppose we shouldn't mention anything like that to Captain Steiner; the poor captain will have a heart attack..."

"No kidding," Zidane muttered, crossing his arms, "Well then, we're going to have to—"

"Yoo-hoo!!" Dojebon suddenly shouted, slamming the door open and making Breireicht jump

in his chair. The poor knight was really too tired for an excitable, hyper kid running around. “I got a morning jog in! I mean, it was going to be morning, but then I got lost again, so it was more like an afternoon jog too! Oh, also the regent’s coming by with the princess and General, so there’s that!”

Zidane shook his head good-naturedly as Pluto Knight V jogged over to the slightly cold breakfast left alone on the table, and he waited when he heard the clomping of two Lindblum guards, who tromped into the room and saluted the doorway. Next came Jasmine and Beatrix, followed at last by Regent Cid and Eiko, the latter of whom rushed forward to hug Zidane with a delighted squeal. “Zidane! I heard you were so busy working last night that you slept in!” She glanced at Dojebon, who waved at her from the breakfast table, before she turned back to Zidane. “How are you feeling now?”

“Much better, actually. How about you? Your cousins aren’t bothering you anymore, are they?” He assumed that since Scott had finished his mission and got Beatrix to Lindblum, the boys would be heading back home or just avoid the Alexandrians for the time being.

“I’ve decided I’m not even going to think about them anymore! You’re here, that means I’m spending all of my time with you!” She looked over at Beatrix, who sat down near Dojebon as he started in on his breakfast. “Well, you and the other Alexandrians! But mostly you.”

“Duly noted,” the genome said amiably, placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder. He looked up at Regent Cid with a cocked eyebrow, “So everything’s okay? With Beatrix, I mean?”

“Of course, thankfully,” the regent said, playing with his mustache, “It sounds like you know why we collected the general; she’s in perfect health, and there’s even some better news to add to it!”

Zidane turned to look at the group; Jasmine had gone to settle on her new favorite place, the balcony, and Dojebon was obliviously eating breakfast as if his general wasn’t going to go on trial tomorrow. Breireicht hadn’t spoken at all during the exchange; he was still poring over his notes. The genome had expected Beatrix to speak up about everything, but she seemed to be deep in thought, her eyes staring off at the wall of the room. Zidane felt an aura of tension cling to everyone in the room. He assumed everyone else felt it, but none of them wanted to say

anything about it. What Cid had said stuck with Zidane, however, and he turned back to cock his head in question, “So what’s the good news? Is there any bad news to go with it?”

“For once, there’s nothing to worry about! Aside from the trial, perhaps. But even then if General Beatrix is convicted, there is nothing we can do for eight months. We would never harm an innocent for the sins of their mother.”

Zidane reeled, Breireicht’s chair squealed as the knight turned quickly, and Dojebon continued to obliviously guzzle a flagon of milk. “Are you serious!?” the genome cried, whirling to face Beatrix, who still hadn’t moved since she sat down. “Beatrix, you’re pregnant!?”

Dojebon choked on his milk; obviously he hadn’t even realized what Cid had been insinuating originally, and now he was coughing over the table as Beatrix sat unfazed. Jasmine was the one who groaned in exasperation and left her “place” on the balcony to come in and chastise the men. “Honestly! It’s obvious the general doesn’t want to be reminded of it every moment of her damned life! Leave her be, literally *no one* cares!”

Zidane scratched at the light fuzz on his cheeks. It seemed more like *Jasmine* didn't want to talk about it, because literally everyone in the room *but* her seemed to care in some way. He wasn't about to try to get on her bad side, however, and Eiko seemed much more inclined to continue the train of thought. "It's not a problem though, right? It means there's going to be a cute baby, and soon Beatrix is going to be home, and everything will be great again!" The genome's eyes flitted to Breireicht, who immediately was back to work. He was determined help Beatrix's trial go well so that Eiko would be right, and Zidane tried not to feel tired just looking at the Pluto Knight. The man was getting too old for the lack of sleep he was getting.

Eiko's words made Beatrix's hand slowly travel to touch her stomach, but she didn't say a word. For a moment, the only sound was Dojebon trying desperately to remember how to breathe, and Cid cleared his throat so the others could turn to him. "This isn't just a social visit, at least for me; I wanted to tell you what I could about the judge who will be overseeing the trial."

Breireicht looked up again, his interest immediately piqued, and everyone looked at the regent as he twirled his mustache. "He is a wise

man. As impartial as I could find. His twin brother was a soldier who was watching over the Industrial District when Brahne invaded.”

Zidane bristled, much more than the others. Jasmine still sucked in a breath, and Eiko crossed her arms. That was the district whose citizens had all been devoured by Atomos during Alexandria’s invasion of Lindblum. “...And he’s the *most* impartial?”

“Judge Noah knows not to let the sins of Queen Brahne’s actions damn what might be an innocent person,” Cid replied, ‘and, as I said before, he is the most impartial. Everyone in Lindblum knew *someone* that had been killed, either by the black mages or Atomos.’ Eiko snorted at the mention of black mages, but her father did not mention that topic any further. Besides, there were other things to worry about at that moment. “Everyone has a bone to pick with Alexandria, and there are people who will attempt to take it out on General Beatrix, even judges.” The regent’s frown was apparent, even under his bushy whiskers. “I would have hoped they would be better about that, but considering the circumstances, I can hardly blame them.”

“I can!” Eiko shouted at her father, “Dagger’s done her best to stop all of this death, and they’re not trying to help out too!!”

“Eiko,” Zidane said suddenly, reaching out to touch her shoulder gently and snapping her from her rage. She turned to him and he shook his head with a smile, “I understand where you’re coming from, definitely, but what we need to do now is to focus on how we can make things right, one step at a time.”

Lindblum’s princess crossed her arms with a harrumph and looked over at the general, who was staring at the wall and moving her lips as if speaking to herself. Eiko let out a grumble and looked away with a nod. “I know, I know. I just... It’s not fair...!”

The regent then turned back to Zidane, his face wearing a determined frown. “You know what to do, Zidane. Focus on Burmecia and Cleyra, since those battles were the most damning piece of evidence against her. Show everyone that she is not the monster they will attempt to paint her as.” He looked around the room, sizing up the Alexandrians, and a look of despair, perhaps even pity, crossed his features. “People will want revenge against Alexandria, and this trial will help shift that view for or against that revenge.”

Zidane knew what Cid was asking. He too hoped the cycle of blood and death would be ended in their generation. The young man's tail twitched erratically as he considered everything: he knew that Beatrix wasn't completely innocent of bloodshed, but he also knew that she had done good things and worked to improve herself. With Steiner and Garnet's help, she even managed to do so. If anyone deserved forgiveness, it was Beatrix.

...Now all that was left was to prove it to the Lindblumians and Burmecians tomorrow.

Zidane and Eiko spent most of the day together, and Beatrix couldn't begrudge the new Lindblum princess some time with her hero. While Breireicht hardly moved from his desk, Dojebon was usually gone, which meant that the general found herself sitting alone on her bed, still trying to fathom what had happened with her life. She was whisked away from her home to a foreign land that may want her dead. She had accepted this, and was ready to die to protect the kingdom, and the people, she adored.

...And yet now she was pregnant. There was a child growing within her, and she could hardly

believe it. Even if that Judge Noah found her worthy of death, then she wouldn't be killed until the child was born... She should be relieved, and yet she wasn't sure how she felt. How could she possibly go to her death after seeing the face of her child? Of Adelbert's child?

She hadn't even suspected. She thought the sickness was the stress from the journey. Now she would have to keep down her stress as much as possible, to protect the child. "Easier said than done," she said silently, her mouth moving without any sound.

She didn't even look up when Jasmine approached, and her guard looked down on the general with worry with a worried expression. "Are you feeling well, general?"

Beatrix didn't really want to answer her subordinate (Was she even technically a subordinate? She was surprised people still called her a general at this point), but she knew that Jasmine was only worried for her, and honestly, she was happy for that. The general looked up at Jasmine with a smile and nodded, "I'm holding up, thanks. How about you? I'm worried that you're working too hard for me. It wouldn't do to have

everyone get ill just because of me.” She glanced across the room, where Breireicht slouched over his desk and continued to scratch at his aging hair in frustration. “You’re all working so hard for me. It hurts to see you pushing yourselves to the brink.”

Jasmine looked across the room, over at the elderly knight was still fixated on his work, and she tried not to scoff. “I can’t speak for the guys, but you’ve done so many things for the *real* knights in the army. There are some people who are more loyal to *you* than to Queen Garnet.” Beatrix took a deep breath; she remembered hearing, back before Bahamut’s attack on Alexandria, that there were citizens who had secretly said they wanted her to rule Alexandria instead. Some hoped Beatrix would do so until Garnet “came of age”, but still some wanted the general to rule for the rest of her life and create a new dynasty, especially after Garnet’s true heritage came to light. It had taken a lot of work, both by Beatrix and by Steiner, to keep the people placated, but apparently it wasn’t enough. There were still people who were loyal to her above all...

“Is that why you’re here?” Beatrix asked, turning slightly to Jasmine, who tensed under her single-eyed gaze, “because of your loyalty to me over Queen Garnet?” There was an icy tone in her voice,

one that made Jasmine freeze when she realized that perhaps her words would not be taken as kindly.

The two were quiet as both of their words sank in, but it was Beatrix sighed, suddenly feeling a larger weight on her shoulders. “I cannot be angry, there are others who believed the same thing. I understand that you wish to see me unharmed as much as Queen Garnet, but I must see my destiny to the end.”

“But General! Your strength and will have led us through the worst of times! You cannot possibly think that you have nothing left to give to your country!”

Beatrix interrupted the Alexandrian guard with a shake of her head, her face taking on her traditional stoic mask, “I am disgraced, a shell of my former self. I cannot be the leader you see me as, not anymore. However, if my death can make people see that Alexandria only wants peace, then this is the best that I can do for my people.” It was more than she could ever do as a queen.

A tiny smile formed at the corner of her lips. Besides, as much as she loved Adelbert (And yes, she could admit to herself that she loved him from within herself. Good luck getting her to announce it

to everyone like a lovesick teenager, however...) she hardly believed he would be a good *prince consort* . She could just imagine him getting into fights with the citizenry over trivial matters.

Jasmine watched as Beatrix turned to look off in the distance, the mysterious smile still on her lips, but the guard could hardly believe what she was hearing. “But no, General Beatrix. You can’t mean that! Alexandria needs you!” She stopped, and she ended up choking back a sob. “The guards need you...” Her face fell, and Beatrix realized what was really on her mind...

Beatrix turned back to her subordinate and searched her glossy eyes that threatened to leak. It was at that moment that she realized just how much the guards relied on her. Adelbert worried over her, Garnet focused so much of her energy to help her, and now even her guards could not bear the thought of losing her. It was with a heavy heart that she had to harden herself and turn towards the still working Breireicht. “Then I suggest you help the good Pluto Knight with his work. I’m sure he’ll want some coffee; he’s been working very hard.”

Jasmine’s gaze fell, and her bottom lip quivered as she fought off her tears. “Y-you’re right. Perhaps

I should.”

Beatrix was quiet as Jasmine slowly stood and walked down the stairs to speak to Pluto Knight VI....As she considered her callous actions, the general clutched her hands in her lap, and wondered if she would be fit to lead ever again.

Zidane and Eiko spent most of the day exploring the castle together. It was large enough that even though she lived there, Eiko still didn't know everything there was to know about it, and they took the time to explore some of the highest towers together. In the evening, the two found themselves at the top of a tower, overlooking the sunset together. They sat precariously on the balcony's banister, Eiko leaning against the genome and sighing happily. “This is so nice. I'm gunna miss you when you go back to Alexandria...”

Zidane hummed in agreement, his tail sweeping back and forth as he squeezed her shoulder, his arm wrapped around her back. Eiko snuggled closer and let out a lilting, pouting whine, “It's not fair. How come there aren't any other eligible bachelors here? No one's as interesting as you Zidane...”

“There’s more to life than romance, Eiko. There are plenty of interesting people here, you just haven’t found them yet; Lindblum’s the biggest city on Gaia.” Besides, he didn’t want to hurt her feelings, but he was pretty sure the only reason she crushed on him was because he was the first boy she had met that was nice to her (and wasn’t related to her).

Eiko swung her legs, a frown apparent on her face as she looked out over the buildings and homes of her people. Her father and mother told her that they were her people, and that one day she may even watch over them as a regent herself, but it never really sunk in what that might entail. Were there that many people in Lindblum? Were there a few people that were like Zidane? “But I don’t like them. Not as much as you.”

Zidane couldn’t deny that. He was the most dashing, sexy dude on Gaia, but Eiko deserved someone who could love her with all of the intensity that he loved Garnet. He took a deep breath and leaned in to speak to her quietly. “Did you know that I didn’t love Dagger when I first met her?” he asked, as if it were a huge conspiracy.

Eiko treated it as if it was; she whirled to stare at Zidane with wide eyes, and she moved so quickly that the genome had to grab her to keep her from falling over the edge of the banister. “Really!? But you were so goo-goo over her the whole time!”

“Sure, I liked how she looked, but it wasn’t until a long time passed that I really began to realize how much she meant to me.” He lusted for her long before he began to love her, “The point is, Eiko, I think it might take a while, but you’ll find someone you care for, and it might not happen immediately, but you’ll meet some great friends....You’re not alone, Eiko. You never were.”

The little girl let out a despondent sigh and dropped her eyes, her face downcast. “I know that, a little. I just...”

“Well, think about this,” Zidane said, leaning back to hop back onto the balcony. He turned to face Eiko, who held out her arms so he could help her down. “Can’t you summon Carbuncle or Madeen? They’re your best friends, right?”

Eiko humphed, crossing her arms and pouting in thought. “We’re really not supposed to summon Eidolons without a good reason, like we’re protecting ourselves.” She crossed her arms, looking

more thoughtful than Zidane had seen her in a long time. She carefully considered each pro and con, but eventually, she spoke up in a small voice, "...but I miss Mog so much. I wonder how she'll feel if I just wanted to talk."

The genome shrugged nonchalantly, as he was wont to do. "It couldn't hurt. You know, just between you and me, but when I'm still groggy and waking up, sometimes I hear Dagger talking to someone. I used to think she was planning out her day, but I realized later that she was talking to Ramuh. She's always worried about how she'll rule Alexandria that she's been asking him for advice. Whether or not he's giving her advice or just listening, I'm not sure. But Eiko, you and Dagger are the last of your tribe. Maybe it's time that you two consider what you might need some new rules, you know?"

Eiko's face was unreadable, but she pulled Mog's ribbon from the pocket she kept it in and clutched it close. Her eyes got a faraway look to them as she considered Zidane's words. "...I just don't want to make a mistake, like my people did with Leviathan and Alexander."

“Well, take some time and consider it. You got time. We all got time.” Zidane reached his hand out, offering his arm for the princess. “Now then, I do believe it’s time for dinner. Shall I escort you to your table, my lady?”

Eiko slapped his arm away with a howling laugh, “Ugh, you sound like Scott, you dork!”...But then she reached out and took it with a giggle, “But if anyone can act like a dork like Scott, it’s someone as cute as you, Zidane.”

...He’d take that as a compliment.

12. The Trial

The next morning was very tense: everyone was up early and preparing themselves as much as they could, but they were so focused on the task at hand that they didn't say much to each other. Jasmine was ensuring that every hair and thread was in place for Beatrix to look as unassuming and gentle as possible, and Zidane watched Dojebon help Breireicht into his suit, foregoing his usual Pluto Knight uniform. It was the first time the genome saw him out of his armor, and it looked like a business suit that one might see from a noble in Treno. While it fit him perfectly, it lacked the fabric and golden flax thread embroidery that a real noble would be able to afford, and thus he looked like a peasant just playing at nobility. Regardless... "That's a nice suit. I suppose I was expecting you to be wearing your uniform, but that works too."

Breireicht smiled as he worked his cravat. "Thanks, Sir— Er, Zidane. My wife and daughter worked together to make it for me. It's the best birthday present a man could ask for, I think."

“Definitely!” It certainly fit better than the ‘one-size-fits-all’ suits that he wore when he was in Tantalus and conning some young idiot out of all of his money. “You’re looking a lot more like a lawyer than a knight, and that’s what we need right now!”

Dojebon hopped up as Breireicht finished buttoning up his sleeves. “Besides, General Beatrix has got Jasmine and I to take care of her, isn’t that right?” Pluto Knight V asked, glancing at Jasmine with a wink.

Jasmine rolled her eyes, looking away and crossing her arms. “Don’t even bother, she only needs me to protect her. Just hang back like you usually do.”

“Aww, I know you wanna spare me from having to do too much work, but you don’t need to worry, I’m happy to help out!” Dojebon said, his face nearly splitting in two from his grin.

Jasmine hunched her shoulders and grumbled, “Oh *joy* .”

“Now now, we’re all in this together,” Zidane said with a helpless shrug, “All of us are working to help Beatrix, so we shouldn’t be arguing with each

other. Besides, the last thing we want to show Judge Noah is how angry and resentful all of us are.”

Beatrix smiled at Zidane as Jasmine let out a deep breath and sighed, nodding. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. Let’s just... let’s get this over with.”

Over with. Zidane wouldn’t necessarily have used those words, especially with the way the trial could go, but he would be lying if he said he didn’t want to just finish this as soon as possible. As the group waited for the Lindblum guards to pick them up, Breireicht took a step forward and coughed softly, causing Zidane to turn to him. Pluto Knight VI gestured back to the desk and looked back at the genome. “I noticed that someone had been messing with the pen and paper while I was asleep last night. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

Zidane blinked before turning back to the desk. He thought he had taken better care of putting things back where they were, but he supposed Breireicht had a good eye for detail, “It’s nothing, really. I just wrote a letter for Dagger, so she wouldn’t worry.” He remembered that night before he left for Lindblum, when Garnet had been so worried about him leaving that she was beginning to cry. He

wanted to keep in touch as much as possible, to keep her from worrying. In retrospect, he probably should have added an addendum about Beatrix's and Steiner's kid, but it would be better to wait until the outcome of the trial.

Speaking of the trial, the door opened at that moment, and everyone froze as three guards entered the room. Everyone was on high alert as the men stepped forward and the leader held out his hand. "We shall escort you, Lady Beatrix."

"Can we come with you!?" Dojebon asked, hopping forward to offer his services. Jasmine, thankfully, dragged him back before he looked like he was assaulting people.

She looked up at the guards who watched Pluto Knight V suspiciously, "We're her personal guard. Please, at least let us walk her to the courtroom. If you prefer, we'll stay in the audience afterwards."

Dojebon pointed to Jasmine as if to say "Yeah, what she said!" and gave a huge, toothy grin. The men looked to their leader, who let out a groan and waved his hand dismissively. "Whatever, they haven't started anything yet..."

A small voice from the guard on the left: "...Yet, Sir."

"...and I *highly doubt* it was all a ploy to start trouble *now*," he continued, turning around and tromping off in disgust. "Just cuff her and let's go."

The Alexandrian guards looked to Zidane, who shrugged in confusion and urged them to go on, "Breireicht and I'll join you soon. Go ahead."

"Great, I'm stuck with *this* epitome of knightly honor," Jasmine muttered, shaking Dojebon a bit before dragging him off. He gave Breireicht and Zidane a thumbs up and turned to follow Jasmine off.

The genome let out a deep breath and turned to Breireicht. "We good?"

"As good as we'll be," Pluto Knight VI replied, clutching his folder to him. His face was scrunched up enough to show that he was nervous, and it was obvious, he was protecting the honor of not only an Alexandrian hero, but the loved one of the man he followed as his captain.

Zidane took a deep breath, one that Breireicht copied, and the genome smiled, trying out his newfound job as his people's "Heart", "You'll do

fine, Number VI. We've got your back." In spirit, of course, but there wasn't much anyone could do about that.

Breireicht let out a chuckle as they walked out of the room. "I'm more than forty years older than you. *I* should be the one giving you lighthearted advice."

The genome let out a laugh and moved with a skip in his step. "Hey man, everyone needs help sometimes!" Zidane knew that better than ever on this trip.

Zidane and Breireicht arrived at the courtroom a little early, although there were already Lindblum and Burmecian men and women who arrived to see the trial, and when they spotted the knight's Alexandrian suit, they got quite a few nasty stares. Zidane looked to make sure Breireicht wasn't letting it get to him, and saw that the knight was staring straight ahead, perhaps running his defense through his head.

He nearly dropped his papers when he heard a familiar voice call out to the two of them, "Now here's a face I didn't think I'd see." Zidane turned and saw the dragon knight before them; Iron-Tail

Fratley, dressed in a casual, breathable outfit common among Burmecians. ‘Breireicht, was it? It’s nice to see you again,’ the Burmecian said, reaching out in greeting. Pluto Knight VI shifted the file in his arms and reached back to shake the dragon knight’s hand in response, and Fratley cocked his head as he looked between the two. “Wait a moment, you’re Beatrix Red-Hair’s defense? I’m so sorry.” He smiled as if he meant it as a joke, but Zidane wasn’t so sure it was.

“Ahh, yes,” Breireicht replied, his surprise returning to professionalism once the conversation returned to small-talk, ‘I couldn’t very well leave it be when my captain is suffering. I just pray Judge Noah understands where we Alexandrians are coming from.’ He coughed when a Lindblumian shoved on his shoulder from behind, and everyone turned to watch him sneer at the Alexandrian as he walked into the courtroom. Pluto Knight VI opened his mouth, thought against calling out to his assaulter, and instead turned back to Fratley with a pained smile. “...and the rest of Lindblum and Burmecia, as well...!”

“So wait, where’s Freya?” Zidane asked, crossing his arms and biting the inside of his mouth in

thought, “I bet she wouldn’t have wanted to miss this.”

“Indeed, she’s disappointed that she wasn’t able to make it, which is why she sent me instead.” Fratley made a face that Zidane wasn’t sure was disappointment, but he bet wasn’t that far from the truth; hanging out with Freya taught him a lot about Burmecian expressions that most foreigners didn’t get. “I would have preferred if I could stay at home, but Freya is working on helping an adventurous geomancer join you Alexandrians in Zamo Basin. I’m unsure when Raine will arrive, but the townspeople will be happy to have her, I assume.”

Zidane noted the face that Fratley wore, and he glanced at Breireicht. This was the opposition he was up against; no one in that courtroom would listen to a word he said. Except, possibly, Judge Noah.

Oh man, please let this judge be receptive...

The courtroom was practically full in only an hour, and Breireicht tried not to let the hissing in the seats behind him make him worry. He glanced back at the Alexandrians in the seats near the front;

Zidane was next to Dojebon, who was seated by Jasmine, and the genome was rubbing his hands together and trying not to make his tail fidget in agitation. He turned back to look at Beatrix, who was still quiet the whole time. In fact, she had decided to close her eyes, and the Pluto Knight wondered if she was trying to block out everything. “General, are you here with me?”

“I’m here,” she replied, although she seemed distant, as if she weren’t speaking directly to him. Her eyes were still closed too; she seemed to be meditating.

“Okay, just... sit tight, I suppose.” Breireicht winced at the term. He hadn’t meant for it to refer to her handcuffs... He felt alone, despite Zidane’s words on the contrary, and for a moment he wondered why he even took this job.

...Ahhh, he loved Alexandria, and his captain, too much to say no.

Finally, the knight turned to look at the prosecutor’s seat, where a smug looking man of high status (judging by his over-the-top hat) lounged peacefully and twiddled his white gloved thumbs.

It was at that moment that the guards announced the arrival of Judge Noah, and Brereicht immediately stood up along with the rest of the room. Pluto Knight VI's blood ran cold when he saw the giant, imposing man tromp into the room. His blonde hair was cut short, and his steely gaze was like a hawk's. However, the most fearsome thing about him was that he was built like a wall. Breireicht remembered that his twin brother was a guard, but to think that a judge would look so strong...? He seemed a perfect blend of muscle and brain....At least, he hoped that, as a judge, his mind was sharp as well. Breireicht suddenly noticed that his knees were trembling as the mighty judge took his seat, and the knight practically fell into his own chair.

“Very well then,” Noah said in a low rumble that somehow seemed to fill the room. Every word he spoke exuded charisma and authority, and it was no wonder why he had taken this job. The judge took a moment to peruse the case file, as if he hadn't already done so outside of the trial previously. ‘We shall begin the trial for Lady Beatrix of Alexandria, the so called ‘Butcher of Burmecia’.’ He glanced up at the lounging man on the other side of Breireicht.

“Prosecutor Richardson, do you have any opening words?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” the prosecutor said immediately, rising up and glancing around the room with a flourish before returning to Noah, “This trial shouldn’t even have happened. We all know the woman’s guilty. Let’s just finish it and be done.”

“Is he serious!?” Breireicht heard Dojebon hiss, and Pluto Knight VI froze, praying that the judge didn’t hear his quiet outburst. “After all the work Breireicht went through!?”

Luckily, Beatrix’s defense heard Jasmine grab him and keep him from speaking another word, and Richardson sat down with a smile as Noah murmured something thoughtfully. He then looked up at Breireicht, and the knight froze in fear. “Very well then. Sir Breireicht of Alexandria. What of your words?”

“Ah, yes, Your Honor!” Pluto Knight VI said quickly, rising a little fast and wiping his jacket of nonexistent dust particles before coughing into his hand, running his hand through his hair and taking a deep breath. “Alexandria would like to formally apologize for all of its crimes against Lindblum, Burmecia, and Cleyra. We have all been harmed

during these past few generations, and we wish only to remain focused on making things right.”

“What do you think you should do about it!?” A Lindblumian shouted from behind, exasperated.

Judge Noah let out a hacking cough that silenced the entire room. He didn’t even need a gavel to command authority, and Breireicht sat down in his chair, running a handkerchief along his forehead as the judge began to speak. “We shall see exactly what that entails. Richardson, your witness.”

The prosecutor’s witness was a Burmecian woman named Lyra, who seemed skittish about even speaking up on the podium. The prosecutor gave her a few soothing words with a smile. “Please, Ms. Lyra, speak without fear, for there is no one who can harm you for speaking the truth.” He turned to glance pointedly at Beatrix, who sat in silence , and he turned back to her, “You will be safe, that I guarantee.”

Lyra nodded and rested her trembling hands on the podium. “I -I was there, the day Alexandria attacked, the day the black mage monsters burned my mother alive and shattered my frozen father,” Lyra began, clutching the podium as she recalled the horror. “And there, among the army of pointy-hatted

devils, was that woman, Beatrix of Alexandria!” She pointed at the general, who kept her eyes closed and didn’t even flinch, and Lyra began to weep as she cried out, “She cut down the guards of the palace on her way to assassinate our Great King Francis of Burmecia, May His Reign be Long and Prosperous!”

Every Burmecian lowered their head and sent a prayer as well, and Richardson nodded, turning back to smile at Breireicht. Pluto Knight VI tried not to let his frown be too apparent as Richardson turned back to Lyra with a pitying smile . “I am sorry you had to recall such a horrendous account, Ms. Lyra. You have helped us tremendously and may go now.”

Breireicht suddenly snapped his head up with a gasp, and he scrambled to stand. “Excuse me, I’m sorry, but uhm, objection...? Y-you’re just going to let her go!?” He turned to plead with the Judge Noah. “Don’t I get to question the witness as well?”

All eyes were on the defense as Richardson blinked, his frown apparent. “What could you possibly ask that would help your case?”

“Richardson,” Noah curtly snorted, turning to him. The prosecutor froze, his smug expression melting into fear. “Stand down. If we want everyone

to accept this trial, we must do things by the book.” Richardson opened his mouth, thought better of it, and nodded stiffly before moving to sit at his chair. Satisfied that he wouldn’t be interrupted, Breireicht moved to stand up and step towards the Burmecian. She began to tremble again when he approached, which paused his advance.

The Pluto Knight’s heart went out to the woman; he could hardly imagine leaving his own daughter alone in this world, and he could think of nothing else to do but to apologize. “Ms. Lyra, I am so sorry for asking you to continue this. No one should have to experience such a terrible tragedy,” he began. Lyra glared at him, and Breireicht felt his words turn to ash in his mouth. He hated feeling like he was harming a woman like this, but he had to continue, for Beatrix’s sake, “However, I must ask you a very important question. You saw General Beatrix in Alexandria fighting with the Burmecian guards in the palace. Tell me, how many civilians did she cut down?”

There was silence, and Lyra tilted her head, as if she didn’t understand the question. “Excuse me?”

“That woman, right over there,” Breireicht pointed at Beatrix, whose eyes were still closed as

she meditated on the words being spoken, “How many civilians did you see her kill? People who were fleeing in fear? How many innocent, unarmed people did she attack?”

Lyra opened her mouth, but she stopped herself, tapping the side of her cheek in thought, and she looked up with wide, surprised eyes. “N-no one. She didn’t harm anyone who was unarmed, nor fleeing...”

“Then, Ms. Lyra, would you say that there is a good chance that General Beatrix was only doing her job as a royal guard, protecting her queen from an army of her enemies?”

“Objection!” Richardson shouted, standing, “That’s speculation! Just because Ms. Lyra didn’t see the general murder the good people of Burmecia doesn’t mean she didn’t do it at some other point during the events!”

“Objection overruled,” Noah growled, pointing at the prosecutor, ‘You had plenty of time to find a person who had the evidence you needed. As it stands, it’s speculation that the general was not merely doing her job as a knight of Alexandria.’ Breireicht let out a sigh he didn’t know he was holding. He immediately sucked in another breath as

the judge continued, “Be that as it may, the general was clearly there, assisting Queen Brahne in sending an army to massacre thousands of Burmecians.” He turned slowly to smile softly at the still trembling woman, and he inclined his head. “Your words have helped us tremendously, Ms. Lyra. Please, go back to your home.”

Lyra nodded softly and rose to leave, and Breireicht let out another sigh as he moved to sit in his chair. He glanced at Beatrix, who hadn’t moved since the trial started, and he opened his files again, searching for something, anything, to finish this with her life.

He looked up when Richardson rose to give his final address, “I think that everyone in this room can see that Beatrix of Alexandria is a murderer who, despite being honorable in combat, still allowed her queen to slaughter thousands of Burmecians with her black mage puppet army, as well as destroy the land and people of Cleyra and Lindblum through use of her then-princess’s Eidolons.” Richardson turned to look at the defense, and the gears in Breireicht’s head began to turn furiously. What was that about Queen Brahne...? “The judgment is clear, and I know you, Your Honor, will find the answer to this frankly obvious riddle.”

Richardson sat down smugly, practically leaning nonchalantly in his chair, and he glanced at Breireicht. The floor was his, so the Alexandrian knight slowly stood and let out a cough. He really, really hoped that this would work. “Your Honor. I don’t... have much of a witness to help my case, but I do have a story.”

“A story!?” Richardson cried, whirling to stare at the knight, “What does that have to do with Burmecia!?”

Breireicht ignored the prosecutor (who was cut off by a glare from the judge), and entreated Judge Noah personally. “I swear, Your Honor, everything will become clear once it is told. Please, allow me to speak.”

The judge took a deep breath through his nose, considering the defense’s words, and he placed his folded hands on his podium. “This trial would be too short without Sir Breireicht’s words,” he said, his tone, for once, playful. His features played with a smile as he nodded at the Pluto Knight. “Say your piece, Sir Knight. I shall judge if it pertains to this trial.” At the end of his sentence, his voice dipped into a threatening tone, and Breireicht realized what the punishment might be if it didn’t.

Nevertheless, Breireicht sucked in a breath; he had made it this far, and he couldn't give up now. "Your Honor, this story begins thirty years ago, 1771, in the City of Alexandria. At that point, Alexandrians never knighted men, and instead I served as an engineer at the walls of the city when the Burmecian army attacked in a preemptive strike against our people..." As he continued his tale, he worked to remember that horrible day as best he could.

A young Breireicht was nudged by his best friend, Hubert, and the two glanced over at the Alexandrian guards at the gate as the men worked on repairing the masonry around the city walls. "So, which one do you want? Let's ask 'em out after we're done here."

"Are you kidding?" Breireicht asked, snorting at his friend, "They're going to be working by the time we're done."

"Not if we conveniently finish when their shift's up," Hubert said, wagging his eyebrows. 'It'll be 'Destiny'! You really gotta learn how this stuff works, my man.' Hubert snorted as Breireicht blinked into the sky. He reached out to shove on his

spacey best friend softly, and he crowed, “Hello? Gaia to Breireicht! Are you even listening to me?”

“What’s that, in the air? What’s that...!?” Breireicht shouted, pointing up at the sky. His shout got the attention of the women, and then they turned to the sky, just in time for one of them to be impaled on the lance of a Burmecian dragon knight who had just dropped from the sky.

“Odin’s Beard!” Hubert shouted as the other guard drew her sword to smite the dragon knight who had slain her partner. She didn’t even consider the idea that there was another who had his lance trained right on her, and both Hubert and Breireicht watched in abject horror as the other guard was hit so hard she ended up attached to the wall the men had been working on, and she writhed like a bug stuck on a stick, screaming up blood before she fell still.

The first dragon knight heard Hubert’s outburst, and when he flicked his lance from the first guard, the engineers saw as he turned to look at them, judge his landing point, and leap into the air.

“Breireicht, bro! Get down!!” Hubert shouted, jumping forward and grabbing his friend. The young man felt the air leave his lungs as he slammed into

the ground, and it took a moment for him to get air back into them. It was just in time to watch as the dragon knight landed, skewering Hubert like a stuck pig. The tip of the lance barely missed Breireicht's kidney, but the force of the landing broke a couple of his ribs and caused him to scream in pain alongside his friend. The two men were lying there, facing each other, and Breireicht watched Hubert move his mouth silently, just before the light faded from his eyes. The young engineer trembled, tears springing to his eyes, but the moment the Burmecian wrenched the lance from his deceased friend, he remembered the predicament he was in.

He stopped moving, playing dead as the dragon knights reconvened and spoke to each other, and then he heard the gut wrenching sound of more dragon knights, leaping into the city from above, for the sky was their home, and Alexandria's anti-air artillery was lacking at that point in time. The young engineer listened and waited as he heard the screams of his people being murdered around him.

Finally, when he thought he might be safe, he whimpered as he pushed Hubert's cooling body from his chest, and he worked through the pain, struggling to crawl. For a moment, he feared that one of his ribs might have punctured his lung or

heart, but it was only his ribs that were in pain, and he seemed to be able to breathe.

He took his working hammer and worked his way to his feet, fighting to keep from puking up his lunch and passing out from the pain, but he couldn't just leave the people alone. If he could find a way to save some people, he would do it.

He heard the scream of a small child, and he peered into the square that housed General Magdalene's statue. Most of the other dragon knights had moved on towards the castle after removing any resistance, but there was one who had stayed behind to keep the rearguard safe. There were plenty of soldiers who were just doing their job in this horrible war, but no, this monster just liked hearing people scream. Breireicht watched helplessly as the dragon knight ripped his lance from a woman's chest, and her child wailed for his mother to wake up.

The engineer burned with rage as the dragon knight turned on the boy, ready to strike him down, and Breireicht charged. All of the pain was gone, forgotten in favor of saving the little child. He was an engineer, he knew exactly where the best place to strike a helmeted Burmecian was. There, where his

ears peeked out, was a chink near the Burmecian's temple.

The child was crying so loud that the dragon knight didn't even hear the exertions of the engineer, and with one swift strike, the man struck true, slamming his hammer into the weak point of the knight's helmet. With a sickening thud, the Burmecian dropped instantly, blood trickling from his tiny snout. The child looked up at the engineer, who grasped at his hardhat and tried not to pass out on top of his victim. The pain had already returned, but the adrenaline kept him alert just enough to keep from passing out.

The engineer slowly turned to the boy, whose wide eyes were filled with tears, and the child continued to sob, hiccuping as he said, "I-I don't know where Papa is, and Mama... Mama...!"

Breireicht felt like he was going to throw up his entire stomach, and there was nothing he wanted to do more than to flop to the floor and pass out. Instead, he managed to place a hand on the boy's shoulder and usher him onward. "L-let's go hide... We'll get you to your family soon."

The boy almost didn't move, but he looked up at Breireicht with all the awe and fear a boy could

have, and together, they snuck off to hide until the battle was over.

“...The attack on Alexandria by the Burmecian dragon knights was unprecedented and savage,” Breireicht continued resolutely, his usual soft face was mute and stony, “Prince Consort Nathan even left the castle to sue for peace, but the knights of Burmecia brutally impaled him in the side. If it weren’t for Regent Cid VIII’s intervention with his Mist-powered airships, we would have lost our beloved prince that very day, rather than twenty years later.” Pluto Knight VI let out a soft sigh, remembering the day that Nathan collapsed in the gardens, his wounds catching up with him. ‘All his family could do was watch as their loved one bled out internally from the wounds inflicted that day. He was killed by the Burmecian army during that deadly, barbarous attack.’ He looked up at Judge Noah and shook his head, fighting the tears that accompanied the memories he still had. “Prince Consort Nathan’s death was just prolonged until that time.”

The courtroom was silent; not one person wanted to shout or even deny the claims, for even they knew their own history, and the preemptive strike against Alexandria. Even Judge Noah was deep in thought

about the story he had just heard, so Pluto Knight VI continued unabated. “When Queen Brahne told us that she had reports that the Burmecian country would attack again, that we were to gather our resources and land a decisive first strike, who were we to deny that her words were false? It had happened before, and we were certain it would happen again. Our Queen Brahne was a good woman before the corruption of Mist seeped into her from that monster, Kuja. She helped establish peace between Alexandria and Lindblum. All she wanted was for everyone to live in peace with their families. How could any one of us even conceive that she had changed over the years? We followed her, all Alexandrians, because we believed in her. We believed in her because the Burmecians never gave us cause to doubt her.”

The Pluto Knight pointed to Beatrix, his brows knitted, “Your Honor, if you condemn this woman to death for the crime of wishing to defend Alexandria from a people who murdered us without remorse...” and then he pointed to himself, his eyes alight with fire, ‘then you will have to condemn me, as well, and all those who wish to protect their homes from villains.’ He took a deep, shaky breath, suddenly self-conscious about his intense behavior, and he

returned to his seat, grabbing at his collar to vent the heat. “Th-that is all. Thank you, Your Honor, for your time.”

There was utter silence, and Breireicht immediately started sweating, knowing that everyone’s befuddled eyes were on him. He heard Zidane lean over towards Dojebon and whisper, “Was he always this fiery? Hope I’m that crazy in seven hundred years.”

“Is he really that old!?” Pluto Knight V asked in bewilderment.

Finally, it was Judge Noah who broke the rest of the silence, his face completely devoid of emotion. “Sir Breireicht, your words ring true; our three great countries have been locked in everlasting war for hundreds of years, and during that time, there was no end in sight. There was no doubt that we as a people have been fighting more for revenge than any other reason, and without the Mist to kindle our desire for war, we are hoping to find a way to abandon these fruitless deaths.”

Pluto Knight VI had to remind himself that judges tended to continue their thoughts with a “however”, in order to show their impartiality, and Breireicht deflated when Noah did just that.

“However, we must also remember that despite the fact that our knights were simply doing their jobs over that time, and that it was the corruption of Mist that spurred our forefathers on, the fact of the matter is that Beatrix of Alexandria was in a position of power; she was below only Queen Brahne in political strength, and yet she did *nothing* to stop the senseless slaughter of innocent people.”

Breireicht almost wanted to speak up, to say that Beatrix had done what she could to stop Brahne when she discovered her queen’s evil ways, and yet he had already finished his closing statement, and he had to sit back and remain quiet. He had failed, he had messed up his defense, and now Beatrix would pay the price. It took all of his willpower not to bury his face in his hands...

...And then, a miracle occurred. “However,” Noah continued, and Breireicht’s heart hammered in his chest, “the fact does remain that Alexandria had no reason to doubt the intent of their queen. Burmecia had attacked them in their capital before. With these thoughts in mind, I am ready to make my judgment.”

He looked to Beatrix, who opened her eyes and rose in reverence alongside Breireicht as Judge

Noah placed his hands on the podium. “Beatrix of Alexandria, you are hereby judged guilty of inaction against the murder of thousands of Burmecians and Cleyrans, and the name General Beatrix shall be buried for all time.”

There was a moment that the Alexandrians’ blood went chill as ice, but then the judge said the most peculiar thing, “In her place shall rise a woman with no pride nor status. Beatrix, you will never hold office ever again, and your name shall be recorded in history as a bloody monster. You shall live a pariah and die as one in the lands of Lindblum, Burmecia, and, if Queen Garnet Til Alexandros XVII is true to her word, in Alexandria as well.” Noah said everything so nonchalantly, so normally, that it was hard for the courtroom audience to keep their mouths from dropping open. The judge reached out, took his gavel, and brought it down with a resounding crack, a dull sound that sent a wad of bile into the pit of Beatrix the Pariah’s stomach, and her fate was sealed with a tone of finality. “That is all. Court is adjourned.”

13. The Aftermath

Queen Garnet til Alexandros XVII slumped in her throne, not feeling in the mood to hold court. Her heart was in the pit of her stomach, worrying about Beatrix more than she could handle. She hadn't even seen Steiner: Laudo had announced that Weimar had basically ordered the captain to take the next few days off, at least until the Alexandrians got word of Beatrix's fate. "And perhaps even more, if it comes to that," the writer said with a worried swallow.

Garnet could hardly handle the suspense, and she was beginning to feel ill. She almost was jealous: at least Steiner could take a few days off when he was sick from worry, but she couldn't just lie in bed. At least, Doctor Tot had tried to get her to do so, but she couldn't bear not to at least hold court for a few hours, just in case.

The tiny man smoothed his whiskers as the queen whimpered and grasped at the letter on her chest. She had already read it twenty times, but twenty-one didn't seem so bad. She unfolded the paper and her

heart soared when she read her name in his (admittedly rough) handwriting:

“Hey Dagger!

We’ve been doing well, no problems happening. I talked with Breireicht, the guy’s super into everything going on here. He’s a smart dude, I think Steiner made the right choice with making him the defense.

We’re going to do our best for Beatrix, and Cid’s on our side as well. The judge was the best he could find, or at least the most impartial, apparently. I’m feeling a little confident, if I have to say. I hope I can give you even better news tomorrow.

I’ll see you soon. I can’t wait to see you again.”

Garnet melted once again for the twenty-first time that day, enough that Doctor Tot looked up from his clipboard and waggled his whiskers. “Your Majesty, are you sure you’re up for this? You’re not even listening to the assessments. Dali has had a drought this year, and food will be a lot more scarce. There is also the...” The good doctor sighed; Garnet was poring over the letter yet again, ignoring

everything he was saying. “Your Majesty, please...” he pled softly.

Someone knocked on the door to Garnet’s throne room, and Lieutenant General Gina walked in unannounced, her boots clacking on the floor. The sound was sharp enough to snap Garnet from her reverie, and she looked up as the woman saluted. “Your Majesty, I have a few reports that you should look over.” She looked up at Garnet, who was trying to un-slump herself and hide the letter, and Gina let out an exasperated breath. “Your Majesty, you do realize that you have more important things to worry about?” she asked, holding up the file she held as if to make a point.

Garnet didn’t like the lieutenant general’s tone. Beatrix was allowed to snark at her because they were best friends, but Gina was a simple soldier, nothing more, and it raised her heckles that Gina would be so informal with her. “I know exactly what is important to this kingdom and what isn’t, *lieutenant general* , and I do not need *you* to remind me of them!” She glared at the soldier and held out her hand, “Give me the reports, and begone from my sight!”

Doctor Tot said nothing, but watched both women with an eagle eye as the lieutenant general clacked up to the throne and humbly offered the file to her liege. Garnet dismissed her with a flippant wave, and Gina bowed before stalking quickly from the room.

Doctor Tot pushed his glasses up his large nose as Garnet let out a frustrated growl and flipped open the file. The soldiers were having trouble concentrating during their training sessions, and the queen scoffed. “Of course they are! They’re worried about their general!” Just like *she* was. She had half a mind to throw the entire file in a fit of rage, but calmed down enough to continue perusing them as her adviser shuffled on his feet awkwardly. It took the queen a moment to realize that the doctor was afraid to speak up around her sharp attitude, and it was with a guilty sigh that she turned to her mentor. “I’m sorry, Doctor Tot. I’m just... preoccupied. I would like it if you spoke plainly.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Doctor Tot said as Garnet flipped to another page with a huff, “You have been under a lot of stress, and I wish you would take a day or two off to come to terms with everything.”

“Come to terms with what?” The queen asked in bemusement, looking up from the file with an expressionless blink.

“With the fact that you have sent off your good friend to die.” Doctor Tot’s blunt words caused Garnet’s blood to run cold, and the elderly man let out a paternal sigh as Garnet slumped once more and lowered her gaze. “Not many have to go through such stress; not even Sir Steiner could claim to say the same.” If it came to that, at least Steiner could blame someone other than himself. The entire kingdom could point their finger at Garnet. She would only be able to blame herself, and Doctor Tot was right: it was killing her, deep down.

“I...” she closed the file and reached for her kerchief, for she already felt the tears coming on, ‘I wanted to say ‘no’. I really did, but Beatrix said she deserved it, and I... “Garnet shook her head and squared her shoulders.” No, you’re right. I could have denied the request despite Beatrix’s desires. I was the one who chose this; *I* was the one who abandoned her.’ And that stabbed her more than the threat of Beatrix’s death. The tears were hot in her eyes as she dabbed at them, hoping to keep her makeup from running. “I just wish Zidane were here.”

Doctor Tot clucked his tongue, realizing the other problem that she was having. Zidane had gone on to protect Beatrix, and while Garnet gave him leave to do so, she had mostly done so to save face and attempt to keep from looking weak in the eyes of her subjects. What they didn't realize was just how much she relied on him. "He will be back soon," her adviser said, hoping to assuage her sadness.

Garnet nodded, but she didn't look like she felt much better. It may be too late by then; she could hardly keep her mind focused enough as it was. "If Beatrix was hurt, however..."

"Your Majesty, I know that you have pushed my worries aside in the morning, but this cannot continue. Please, return to your chambers and rest for the night. I'm sure that we will receive word of Lady Beatrix's fate soo—"

As if on cue, Mosh flew into the room with a quick "kupo!" and held up a letter that made Garnet's heart soar once more. A part of her remembered that there was a chance the news wasn't good, but to hear anything from Zidane made her stand up and jog up to the table that Mosh was flying over. "Please, Mosh, give it to me!"

Doctor Tot gave a thoughtful hum as the queen tore open the envelope and read it as if it were the last written thing in the world:

“Hey Dagger,

We’ll be back in Alexandria soon, and you can tell Steiner the good news before he gets an aneurysm. Beatrix is coming with us! Breireicht has everything you’ll need to know about Judge Noah’s ruling. I don’t think she’s going to be general after all of this, so be ready to figure out what you wanna do about that.

We’re going to be back soon, so go ahead and tell Steiner the news. I figure it’d be best to let him know ahead of time.”

Garnet looked up suddenly, and she hitched up her dress before rushing from the room. Doctor Tot called after her, but she ignored his words, charging for the barracks as quickly as her high-heels would allow.

The guards were surprised to see their queen up and about, especially among the commoners, but she had the look of a woman on a mission, and they began to realize that meant news of Beatrix. Plenty of them wanted to hear news of their general, but

their queen would not be deterred until she found Steiner in the Pluto Knight break room, actually listening to Laudo's newest idea for his novel. He would do anything to keep his mind off of the Lindblum trial, even listen to something as boring as a useless novel.

Pluto Knight IV stopped mid-sentence and looked up at Garnet, who stood in the doorway with a wild expression. She was backed by nearly a dozen female soldiers, and it all looked very worrisome. By the time Steiner looked up, he froze in horror, but Garnet reached out and took his hand. "She's safe, Steiner! She's coming home! She's coming back to us!"

The barracks erupted into raucous joy, and the entirety of Alexandria Castle celebrated long into the night.

Regent Cid allowed Beatrix to rest for the night as Breireicht was given the legal papers, as he was the only one who truly understood some manner of legalese in the group, and while the new pariah slept off her anxiety, Pluto Knight VI and Zidane took some time to peruse it while the genome wrote a

letter telling the news to his lover. “From what I can gather, Judge Noah has decided to let Lady Beatrix live, but in exchange, the countries of Lindblum, Burmecia and Alexandria are to do whatever they wish with her, if they find her in their borders.”

“So, what, she’s essentially a non-entity?” Zidane asked, furrowing his brow.

“Essentially she’s not human, yes. Or at least, she doesn’t possess any rights as a human being in Lindblum, according to Judge Noah’s ruling. I don’t think it’ll take long for Burmecia to accept it as well.” Breireicht looked up from the notes, his expression somber. ‘If Queen Garnet were to have her continue her service as a general, I’m sure it would reflect poorly on her desire to bring peace to the Mist Continent.’...He took a moment to frown in thought. “Perhaps we should find another name for that.”

“And maybe the Forgotten Continent as well,” Zidane agreed with an impish smile. “So what’s your take on the ruling? You have any idea of what Garnet should do?”

“I should not even hope to assume the best course of action for our beloved Queen Garnet,” Breireicht said humbly, perhaps only out of respect for the

royalty of his home, but when Zidane cocked an eyebrow, the Pluto Knight elaborated. “*But*, if I were to make a decision by my less-than-illustrious self, then I would perhaps send her away from the castle, where she could find a place in Alexandria to live out her days in relative peace. It wouldn’t do to have a zombie as our general.”

Zidane let out a laughing grunt, that impish smile returning. “To be fair, the group didn’t have much trouble letting me lead when I was afflicted with zombism.” He tried to chuckle at his joke, but Breireicht’s solemn, pained expression stopped him, and the genome realized what the problem was with the Pluto Knight’s solution. “Oh, right, what about Steiner, huh?” How could a knight captain live his life with a woman who was banished from the castle he swore to protect?

Breireicht didn’t answer the young man’s question, and instead stood up with his patented “old-man groan”. He placed a hand on Zidane’s shoulder, squeezed it, and released him. “...I’m so tired. I think... I’m going to go rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Zidane continued to stare at the chair that Breireicht left behind, the gears in his mind going

into overdrive as he considered how he would relay this to his friends, and what their decisions would eventually be concerning the trial's ruling.

...Zidane leaned forward and scrubbed at his eyes, suddenly feeling exhausted. What he wouldn't give for Garnet to be there, holding him tight and telling him everything would be okay...

The next morning started before the sun rose for the Alexandrians, and Regent Cid wanted them to be gone, just in case there were those even in the castle that were unhappy with Noah's decision. He brought the Alexandrians in with a great flair, even sending his own nephew and daughter because he couldn't be there himself. This time, he had them sent back on a freighter that looked more like food transport than a liner for a VIP. Luckily, the subtlety was just what everyone wanted: Jasmine was still on high alert, and Zidane's tail frizzed at every sound that seemed out of place. Everyone just wanted to be home as soon as possible, and they were happy to sit in the cargo hold and let out a sigh of relief. "We're going home..." Breireicht said through a sigh, as if he weren't sure he could believe it.

“You did it, Number VI!” Dojebon announced, ‘We did it! We all did it!’ He jumped up from his sitting position and started doing several squats to get rid of his excess energy. “Man, the captain is going to be *stoked!*”

Beatrix looked around the hold, trying to keep the dread in her stomach from making her sick. Watching the other Alexandrians helped, as even Jasmine couldn’t help but keep a smile on her face as she watched Dojebon grab a surprised Zidane and drag him around the hold, and the two danced as Breireicht clapped a rhythm. It was just that, what Dojebon said...

Steiner would be so happy, definitely....Until he got the news, perhaps....She couldn’t help but wonder if Steiner could handle staying with a woman who could never have the status the significant other of a knight should have. Would it have been better if she died an Alexandrian hero, one that people could remember and love in memoriam? She decided to pretend she was meditating, as the others didn’t bother her when she kept her eyes closed, and she really didn’t want to talk to anyone else at this point.

When they had gone to Lindblum in the first place, they had left a little later in the day, and arrived just in time for dinner, but since they had left before the sun rose in the sky, they arrived in Alexandria a little after lunchtime. When the airship touched down, Dojebon nearly rushed out without anyone else, and it wasn't until Breireicht coughed loudly that he remembered to at least stay with the new (potentially) prince consort.

When Beatrix stood and walked out into the sun, with Jasmine still on her heels (it felt wrong, somehow, that she was still treating her as someone who deserved an iota of respect), she took a deep breath and looked out at her home, Alexandria, and she wiped at her eye, for she was crying uncontrollably. She reached up and held her hand over her face. She couldn't believe she was still alive to see her home again. At that moment, she couldn't be bothered to care about anyone else's feelings about whatever Judge Noah said. The relief washed over her, and she took a moment to simply cry.

The Pluto Knights stood with Zidane, who stretched himself out and shook out his tail, and Jasmine stared at the floor, unsure of what to do. The awkwardness was in the air, so it was the

genome who had to call out to the group. “We’re outside of the city itself, so let’s at least head in. I don’t think anyone’s going to realize we’re out here; we were kind of snuck out of the city, so we should...”

The young man was interrupted by an ominous clanking, out in the distance, and that cold dread, along with utter joy, washed over Beatrix as everyone looked up at the figure approaching them. She took a tentative step forward, making sure it wasn’t just a different Pluto Knight (of course it wasn’t, only Dojebon ran around like that, and he was right next to them), before she hitched up her petticoat and dashed forward....She wondered why people even wore dresses, how was she supposed to run into her lover’s arms with such cumbersome clothes!?

All of that was forgotten, however, when the two practically collided, and hands grasped each other as if they hadn’t seen each other for decades. Steiner smelled rank from running and sweating in his armor, and Beatrix knew in the back of her mind that it must have been because he ran here all the way from the city, and that was the most beautiful thing to her. She needed this, so much. She wanted to tell him, to tell him how much she loved him, but she

couldn't say so around their kisses, and she let her actions speak for her once again.

Finally, however, they pulled themselves away, and Steiner clutched her cheeks and looked into her eye, and Beatrix felt sorry that she worried even for a moment that he would ever push her away. "I-I'm home," she said breathlessly.

"Welcome home," he replied immediately, kissing her again. She could taste the sweat on his lips, and she tried not to be turned on in public.

When they pulled away again, Beatrix immediately told him: "Steiner. I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant...!"

"That's great, Bea, I—" Steiner stopped, and his brow knit in confusion. His eyes dropped to her stomach before he looked back up at her eye, his face one of complete bewilderment. "...Is it mine?" he asked suddenly,

Now it was Beatrix's turn for her brow to furrow, in anger. "Is it *yours*!? Whose do you *think* it would be!?"

Steiner's eyes bulged and he sputtered, "N-no, I didn't mean to imply-! I meant, I can't even believe it! H-how? How!?"

“How do you *think*!?” Beatrix howled, her anger giving away to laughter as she slapped his arm. She continued to laugh at the absurdity of it all, all the way until the laughter finally gave way to tears once again, and she practically fell against the still-bewildered Steiner, leaning on him the way one might lean against a wall when they were tired. Steiner reached out to ask her what was wrong, that he was sorry for making her angry, and she waved off his fears by slapping at his Maximilian armor (the one he came back with after his excursions in Memoria). “I missed you... so much. Gods, Bert, I just... I... I was so—”

Her words degenerated into even more sobs, and the captain instantly wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight as she cried out every last one of her tears.

...There was no better feeling in the world.

14. Simmie

As the group began heading into the city proper, Breireicht explained what was going on with Judge Noah's decision regarding Beatrix. Steiner had been told about Zidane's letter, and he was curious about what that entailed. The pariah was quiet as Pluto Knight VI explained exactly what was going on, and she kept her eyes trained on the flowers, still worried about his reaction. Her fingers slowly moved to touch the back of her lover's gauntlet, and he responded by reaching out and grasping it securely. "And thus we are not sure what to do with the Lady Beatrix. As a pariah, she should not be allowed into the castle, nor should she rub elbows with the nobility." Jasmine scoffed, and Breireicht continued. "We shall... have to see what Queen Garnet decides to do with her."

Steiner squeezed Beatrix's hand, she turned to look into his eyes, and the two stood quietly as Zidane and Dojebon passed by them. They walked into the square in front of the castle gates, and the genome paused when he noticed Dagger and Garnet standing at the gate. He peered at Garnet, dressed in her beautiful outdoor gown and wearing a serious

frown, and he noticed the way her hair curled at the end, instead of that straight waterfall of black...

...Whereas Dagger was wearing her usual orange leotard as well as the brightest smile he had ever seen her have, and the moment she began charging over to them, Zidane realized that Elizabeth was playing at Garnet, to give her cousin some time to be a normal woman. When Dagger slammed into him and wrapped her arms around his neck, she gave him a kiss on the lips and looked up drunkenly into his eyes. "Oh Zidane, Zidane!"

"Hey there, Dagger," Zidane said, for once being able to say her traveling name and have it actually be the appropriate one at the time. He squeezed her back and nuzzled her temple affectionately. "Missed you too."

"You brought her back, you brought her back!" Dagger reached out and grabbed Beatrix around her neck as well, and she drew both Zidane and Beatrix together, giggling like a schoolgirl. "You're back! You're all back!"

Elizabeth-as-Garnet took a few steps forward and nodded at Steiner, and when she glanced at Jasmine the guard instantly moved to watch the scene unfold. Just as Dagger squeezed her friends once again and

pulled back, Breireicht coughed and took a step forward. “Hmm, Your Majesty,” he said, addressing Elizabeth as he was supposed to, “I have news about Judge Noah’s ruling.”

All eyes were on him, especially Dagger’s, as the Pluto Knight’s announcement was more for her than her body-double. He cleared his throat and continued, “Lady Beatrix has been stripped of all rights as a human in Lindblum. She has lost any honor she once held, and I suspect this same ruling will be applied in Burmecia as well...”

Elizabeth looked at Dagger before turning back to Breireicht. “Are you suggesting that we remove her from the castle?” she asked softly. The Pluto Knight went quiet, and even Steiner and Beatrix turned to each other before dropping their gaze to the cobblestones. The entire group took on a somber air, and finally Elizabeth nodded, “I shall decide what to do later. Perhaps it would be best if Lady Beatrix spent the night in another location while I decide Alexandria’s stance on the matter.”

Breireicht bowed and moved to stand with Dojebon near Zidane. As Pluto Knights, they should be protecting the prince consort, and it just so happened that the real queen was standing near him,

so they got to play double duty. It was Jasmine who stayed with Elizabeth, and everyone looked expectantly at Steiner and Beatrix, no one quite sure what to say or do. It was Steiner, surprisingly enough, that coughed into his hand and spoke up first. "I have an idea, a place where she may stay."

Beatrix turned to him, her expression quizzical, but Elizabeth nodded and continued, "Very well. We shall make arrangements tomorrow then. Come, we must return to the castle." She then turned and proceeded onward, Dagger tugging Zidane along as the guards followed closely behind.

That left Steiner and Beatrix alone. The pariah still wasn't sure what to say, and she looked at her lover's gauntleted hand. She saw it reach out and take hers silently, and their eyes met once again. There was nothing they needed to say, they just needed each other. "Well then, shall we go?" Steiner asked, breaking the silence.

Beatrix nodded, finally finding her voice long enough to smile at her lover and say, "Lead the way."

The two walked together through the streets, and Beatrix found that people hardly noticed her presence, given her appearance. It was an alarming fact, as she was used to people giving her a wide berth in respect for her position. Now, the two had to basically use Steiner's wide gait to cut through the crowds as they moved, and she felt like a waif that needed to be led like a child. Or protected like a pariah...

She didn't say much as they walked, even though the pace wasn't exactly brisk. Beatrix wasn't really in the mood to talk, and the way her hand strayed to her belly showed just who she was worried for...

The pariah noticed where they were headed. It wasn't necessarily the mansions of the Treno nobility, but the Steiner family must be well off if they could afford a house like these. Most of them weren't even stores with studios built above them!

The Steiner "manse" was a three story building, with the first floor being a small, local general store. It seemed like Adelbert's family was in the merchant business, which made her wonder if he was ever at odds with his father about 'leaving the family business'. When they finally arrived on the Steiner doorstep, they released each others' hands, and

Beatrix smoothed out her petticoat as he knocked on the door. He sucked in a deep breath and turned ever so slightly towards his lover, “You’ll like Simone. She’s a little shy to strangers, but she likes to talk. Having a conversationalist will hopefully help you stay, you know...” He had trouble finding the right word, and gave up as the door unlocked and opened a crack.

The moment the woman noticed who was on the other side, she opened the door and raised her arms happily. “Brother!” she called, reaching out to hug Steiner. She barely reached around his arms, but she didn’t let that bother her and squeezed him in his armor, “It’s been so long, how have you been!?”

Steiner stammered out something about it being nice to see her too, but the moment his little sister (apparently?) laid eyes on Beatrix, her eyes lit up. “Ohhhhhh! You brought your *girlfriend*! Ohhh, you must be General Beatrix! My name is Simone Steiner, but you can call me Simmie, if you want.”

“Thank you, uhm... Simone,” Beatrix began, feeling a lot like Steiner at this point in time, “But I’m not really a general anymore. Just Beatrix is fine.”

“OHHHHH, Or how about Bea!?” Simone asked. Steiner coughed and she watched him slice a hand across his neck, and she immediately changed her tune, “Trixie it is! Come in, come in, I was just making lunch! Oh, it’s been a while since I had guests!”

“Adelbert not visiting as often as he should?” Beatrix asked Simone, ignoring her lover’s exasperated groan as they walked inside the grocery store and past the counter. They walked into the back room and up the stairs to where the Steiner living quarters were, and as they walked, the pariah noted Simone’s mannerisms. She wasn’t as small as most Alexandrians, which made sense; she was practically as large as her rather giant brother, and the way she swayed her hips showed that she liked her figure just fine.

It was hard to tell Simone’s exact age; she seemed to enjoy powdering her face, and her clothing was bright and eccentric, much different from Adelbert’s subdued outfits (although the way he seemed to enjoy painting his eyelashes showed that they weren’t completely different in *every* way), but from the way she acted, it wasn’t hard to assume she was the younger sibling; older siblings tended to be a lot more serious.

The kitchen was spic and span, despite the fact that she had just been making lunch. It was just simple soup from yesterday, apparently, although now there wasn't enough for three people. "Not to worry!" Simone said as she began serving the soup in bowls, "I'll make some sandwiches too; that'll alleviate the problem!"

Beatrix thanked Simone as the younger Steiner began slicing off a bit from the shank of ham. The pariah turned to look up at Adelbert, who sighed again and sat down at the table, looking like he wasn't sure what to do as he stared at his bowl of soup. It was refreshing to see something so normal, her lover being flustered like he was. It made her realize that she was safe again, and that she didn't need to worry anymore. She was an honorless dog, but she had her life, and her love.

Simone turned and placed the sandwiches on the table before settling down next to her brother and his girlfriend, and she let out a relaxed breath. "Well then, let's eat, shall we?"

"Of course, thank you so much, Simone," Beatrix replied. Adelbert let out an affirmative grunt, and the three began their lunch quietly, with only the

chewing and slurping of their eating to accompany the awkward silence.

It was Simone who spoke first, and Beatrix wondered if Steiner even knew his sister that well; he had referred to her as shy, and yet here she was, jabbering like a jay. “Now I know you’ve been busy with rebuilding Alexandria; that’s why I haven’t been worrying about you coming out to see me, but to think that you wouldn’t even announce your visit!”

Beatrix turned to Simone with a faint smile. “Things have been hectic, recently. In fact, I suppose you could say I’ve been demoted. I’m no longer a general, as I mentioned before.”

Simone turned to look at Beatrix, and then at her brother, her brows furrowed in confusion. “What’s going on, brother? Is everything okay at the castle?”

“What? No! I mean, yes! Everything’s fine!” Adelbert grumbled, his frown apparent, “Beatrix has just returned from a trip to Lindblum, where they held a trial to see what punishment she should have.”

The pariah winced at Adelbert’s words; she might not quite have said it that way, especially since

Simone whirled to gape at Beatrix, her eyes wide. “Punish!? What did they do? Did they hurt you?”

“No, thankfully, no, it was more complicated than that,” Beatrix replied, shaking her head, ‘But I’m not a general anymore. I probably will never hold a position of authority, and my knighthood will be a stain on Alexandria’s history.’ She watched as Simone turned to Adelbert’s stony, expressionless face, and his little sister turned back to blink in question at Beatrix. “I am a pariah now. I suppose... I guess Adelbert brought me here in order to let me have a roof over my head; I probably will not be able to find a place to live on my own anymore.” How would she even get a job at that point? Should she even get one...? With a child on the way, she supposed she would have to stay home and care for the baby...

...Beatrix’s blood ran cold as ice as that particular thought crossed her mind, and she didn’t even listen to Simone as she spoke with her brother (“Poor Trixie, well, I’m happy to at least help her out in any way I can!”). She placed her hand on her stomach, and she felt it flip. That was true: she was a pariah, with nothing that she could do to regain any semblance of honor or dignity. She would be trapped in this house, caring for her child like a... a *breeder* .

She suddenly wasn't very hungry, and she pushed the food away with a groan. "...The flight has taken a lot out of me. Is there a room I may stay...?"

"Oh! Right!" Simone stood and began flitting away to prepare a bedroom. 'You can have Adelbert's room, it's not like he'll miss it. Unless you prefer Mom and Dad's old ro—' "She paused suddenly, as if she just realized what she said, and both Adelbert and Simone turned to look at each other, eyes wide." What am I saying?' the younger Steiner said cordially, shaking her head and waving the thought away flippantly. "I'm sure you two share beds all the time, be back in two shakes!" She waved again as she left the captain choking on his soup and Beatrix only slightly dumbfounded. She turned to look at her lover, and she frowned at his despondent look.

"Simone is living alone, isn't she...?" she asked him, her eyebrows furrowing in thought. Their mother and father were gone, and Simone was running the store on her own. "And you've been too busy to visit. We've been rebuilding for so long, it's hard to imagine a time we've had some free time." Was that another reason he brought her here?

Adelbert pursed his lips and played with his soup, his usual frown creasing further. “I was hoping that you two might be able to get along well.”

...Beatrix let out a sigh and stood, pacing slightly as everything came to light. She wasn’t sure if she even knew how to get along with civilians anymore. Or well, “get along” with much of anyone. She got along with Adelbert well enough, but he was *Adelbert*.

...And yet, it was better than living in the slums, and she wouldn’t mind... *trying* , not only for her lover, but for Simone as well. She looked Adelbert square in the eye and nodded. “She’s a very kind woman, I’d love to get to know her better.” It wasn’t the perfect truth, but she was willing to give it her all to make it true.

She took a step forward as Adelbert rose from his chair, and the two reached out to take each others’ hands. The Pluto Knight rubbed his thumbs over the back of her hands and looked into her own eye. “Thank you, it means a lot to me. I don’t want to say that... perhaps I’m happy about these arrangements, but I know Simone will be taken care of as long as you’re there to help her.”

Beatrix sighed through her nose, tossing her hair a bit and biting the inside of her mouth in thought. "...I'll need a change of clothes. I can't stand this petticoat, and I'll be happy to be rid of it."

Adelbert kissed her temple and nodded. "I'll have everything delivered here as soon as possible. Please expect Laudo; he usually doesn't have anything better to do." He was also one of the few knights that still listened to him, as well.

Beatrix smiled at the kiss, happy that at least her lover hadn't changed in his treatment of her; the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. "I am not thrilled with the prospect of waiting around, but... perhaps I can acquaint myself with the house while I do." She was about to release the captain, but something caused her to stop and hold his hands tighter, and her brows furrowed as she glared up at him in righteous fury. "But you're not leaving until you at least say goodbye to your sister. The poor girl has been living alone for how long!? I refuse to let you just tromp off without at least spending some more time with her!"

Adelbert's eyes brightened, and his smile returned. "There's the Bea I know and love."

...This time, Beatrix didn't even chastise herself for letting her heart soar at those words.

15. The Meeting

Garnet hadn't felt happier in a long time, walking about Alexandria freely as Dagger. She hadn't imposed too often on Elizabeth, and as such she never really went out among her people often enough. There were times she would walk around as queen, but going as Dagger was a slightly different affair, especially when she had a cute little genome following obediently behind her. Their hands were clasped together, and sometimes she would turn around to grin at him; she found that his flirtatious winks were sending a thrill up her spine, as opposed to confusing or boring her in the past. She couldn't wait to get him back to the castle and find out what to do about Beatrix.

...Oh, that was a sobering thought, and it brought her right back down to Gaia. As the group approached the gondola, Jasmine took control of the oar, and the girls moved to sit at the chairs. Zidane and Breireicht stood, of course, which left Dojebon alone: "Take five, Number V," Garnet said, winking at him, "We'll take it from here."

Pluto Knight V opened his mouth awkwardly, and his face screwed up in confusion not because he felt he was being snubbed, but because he honestly didn't know how to take a break, and didn't know what to do with himself. "Oh. Okay. I'll uh, go make the rounds and come on back on the next gondola! Then me and Jasmine can make sure there aren't any spies around the cast—" He was interrupted when the Alexandrian guard knocked him to the ground with her pole before casting off.

"Oops, sorry 'bout that, Doj!" Jasmine called out to him as he writhed on the floor, clutching his stomach and groaning. She turned to see Breireicht's blank stare, and she shrugged in reply. "What?"

The group was quiet as they traveled across the moat to the castle, and soon they arrived in the foyer of the castle, bright and full of energy. Immediately Garnet shook her hair out and turned to Jasmine, her royal persona shining through. "Jasmine, please call for Doctor Tot and have him come to my throne room, if you would."

Jasmine faltered for a moment, and Zidane raised an eyebrow, but before anyone could make mention of it, she snapped to attention and bowed. "At once, my queen," she replied before turning and jogging

off. Garnet nodded and turned to beckon the others to follow her, and Elizabeth turned to blink at Breireicht, who shrugged in reply and moved in step behind his liege. Even Zidane jogged closer to the others as they followed quickly behind the queen, and the genome felt, for once, out of his element in the castle as things started becoming political. He wasn't entirely sure why Garnet wanted him to join them, although if he had to guess, he might say she just wanted him near after losing him for the past couple of days.

It wasn't a huge problem, because Elizabeth seemed out of her element as well, and they walked in step behind Breireicht as they entered Garnet's throne room. Zidane admired the architecture and the simplicity of Garnet's throne, and he watched as the queen moved immediately to the table, grabbing at a notebook and glancing at the Pluto Knight.

Zidane shuffled awkwardly on his feet as he and Elizabeth stood in the corner of the room, and he leaned over to whisper at her: "I guess she needed you to join us because you're 'Garnet' right now?"

The queen's cousin glanced at Zidane out of the corner of her eye. "I'd say you're not as dumb as you look, but even that would be a lie."

The genome smiled amiably, watching as Doctor Tot entered the throne room with Jasmine in tow, and after Garnet dismissed the Alexandrian guard, the three immediately began their conversation to decide what to do with Beatrix. As the nobles continued, Zidane turned to talk to Elizabeth, now that they were “trapped” in the throne room without much to do, “Sounds like a pretty thankless job, so uh, thanks for helping Dagger out, helping keep her safe and stuff.” He knew that Garnet could take care of herself, but queens tended to have different worries than a head on attack, and most of her best ways to defend herself involved leveling the rest of the area. Besides, if someone *did* attack Elizabeth-as-Garnet, then she might be hurt. Garnet could probably heal her regardless, but it was never fun getting hurt in the first place.

The cousin-clone, on the other hand, didn’t care much for Zidane’s friendly demeanor, and she crossed her arms with a scoff. “I know what game you’re playing, monkey-boy.” Zidane’s eyebrow quirked as Elizabeth scowled, “You want to be nice to me so I won’t notice when you start weaseling into the rest of the castle’s heart. It’s *cute* the way you’re pretending you love Her Majesty, but I’m not as stupid as the Pluto Knights.”

Zidane had spent his entire life being hated by nobles, so he had learned how to keep his cool when people started slinging mud, but he couldn't just let it drop when she implied that he didn't actually care for Garnet. "Sorry to disappoint, Beth, but if I didn't love Dagger, I wouldn't even bother living here." There were tons of more interesting places in Gaia than Alexandria Castle, especially since it was basically a ruin (Not that he'd mention it out loud, especially in front of Garnet, whether she was listening in or not).

The two looked each other in the eye, each sizing the other up before Elizabeth narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing the genome. "If you loved her as much as you *claim* you do, then you wouldn't have left her the way you did."

"You weren't there," Zidane said quickly. His smile was still on his face, but his voice was tinged with annoyance as he continued, "You didn't know what was happening, why I had to go. If Dagger or Steiner, or anyone went with me, I couldn't have been sure we could all get back home together." It was better to have his friends go back to their lives than to follow Zidane to their deaths.

“I know enough,” Elizabeth hissed in response, not above treating Zidane with disdain, especially in such a private location, “I know that *you* weren’t here for the past two years. I know that you hadn’t seen Her Majesty crying in her room, that you didn’t see *my cousin* having to be strong when the man she loved *abandoned* her to save a man who *nearly destroyed the universe*.”

Zidane opened his mouth, but he paused. “You... have a point,” he acquiesced, although he didn’t add that she was thinking like a Gaian rather than a Terran. He assumed she wouldn’t appreciate him asking her to be a little more open minded about the stuff Kuja went through, and the stuff that *he* might have gone through, if he hadn’t been ‘saved’ by his brother. He crossed his arms, though not angrily, and looked at Garnet as she spoke with the doctor and the knight, and he let out a disappointed sigh. “I didn’t want to be gone as long as I was, however. If I could have gone back with Dagger, if I could have been there for her the whole time, I would have.”

Elizabeth scoffed and turned away, but she didn’t push it any further and instead took a deep breath before letting it out as a sigh. “Queen Garnet and I used to play with each other when we were children, and she treated me so kindly. She’s my cousin; I

love her more than anyone else in this world. I don't fight her decision to keep you here because I want her to be happy..." She turned back to Zidane, her face one of fury as she grabbed fistfuls of her sleeves. "But I will do whatever I can to protect her from people who would hurt her, and that includes you, if I must."

Finally, Zidane could bow cordially to her and not feel like he was pretending to be nice to her, "That's completely understandable, Beth. I'll do whatever I can to show that my feelings are true, to you and to Alexandria."

Elizabeth snorted. "Don't call me 'Beth', I only let Her Majesty do so."

Zidane's smirk was mischievous. "That's an order I'm gunna have to refuse, Beth." The cousin-clone dug an elbow into the genome's rib and he jumped out of the way with a snorting laugh. He watched as the woman's lips curled into a smile, and the two grinned at each other for just a moment before they looked away, back towards the object of their affections. Queen Garnet, meanwhile, was wrapping up her talk with Breireicht and Doctor Tot, and the genome jogged up to the Pluto Knight, and he frowned when he saw that the knight's

countenance was one of exhaustion. ‘Hey there, Breireicht, what’s the verdict?’ He winced when Breireicht looked at him with a disbelieving frown, and he shrugged, “Sorry, bad choice of words. I meant what did Dagger decide to do with Beatrix?”

“Queen Garnet is a very wise monarch,” Number VI replied, his tone stating that he actually believed that and wasn’t just saying it because she was his ruler, ‘She is worried more for her people than her own friendships. Lady Beatrix will never set foot in the castle again. As for Save the Queen... “Zidane pursed his lips when the knight began rubbing the bridge of his nose,”...It will pass to the next general, the one that she chooses.’ He shook his head. “I should return to my post; I thank you for your support during the trial, Mist— ah, Zidane.”

“Woah woah woah!” Zidane shouted, sliding between Breireicht and the door, and he placed a hand on the knight’s shoulder to hold him back, ‘You’re not going back to *work*, not after all the crap you had to go through! Yo Dagger!’ He shouted across the room, and Garnet looked up from her conversation with Doctor Tot, “Breireicht’s totally taking like the rest of the week off, right? He’s worked way too hard to go back to work!”

“Oh!” Garnet blinked, her face one of confusion, ‘I’m sorry, I must have been too focused on everything, of course, Sir Breireicht. Please, take as much time as you need to recuperate. I’ll let Steiner know you’re indisposed.’ She then turned to Elizabeth and smiled, “I’m sorry for you as well, Beth. Please, go get yourself freshened up. That dress isn’t a lot of fun to walk in for too long, I should know.”

Elizabeth curtsied as Pluto Knight VI bowed in humility, and the both of them looked at Zidane before Garnet’s cousin swept by them and out the door. Breireicht looked relieved, and he placed a hand on the genome’s forearm. “Thank you, Zidane. I appreciate everything you’ve done so far in the castle, and I hope to see more of you in the coming months.”

“Pleasure’s mine, Number VI. Just head home and kiss your wife and daughter, okay?” The genome smirked and whispered, “I’m sure your wife’ll like having you to herself for a few days.”

“Ahahaha, you know how to make an old man chuckle, my friend!” Breireicht said, his smile brightening, “Alas, when you get to be my age, it doesn’t come as easily as that. Pray that you never

have to have as much trouble as I do in forty years.” He pet Zidane’s arm, touched his helmet as if to tip it, and exited the room, looking much more chipper than before.

Zidane waved the knight off before turning back to Garnet and swaggering up towards her. She didn’t respond to his padding, but she didn’t squeal when he wrapped his arms around her waist and listened in while Doctor Tot adjusted his glasses and tried not to react to the new growth attached to Garnet’s back. “Ahh, yes, Zidane, we were just talking about you.” Zidane looked up from Garnet’s shoulder, and the queen reached up to run her hand into his scalp and kiss his cheek. “It’s about this… arrangement, you two have.”

“Come on now, Dagger,” Zidane said jokingly, nuzzling her ear, “a *lady* doesn’t kiss and tell.”

Garnet tickled him on the neck in retaliation and giggled. “We’re talking about the future, Zidane. I know you’re not big on that kind of stuff, but it would be better to talk about this now rather than later.”

Ohhh, *that* killed his mood right quick, but he didn’t release her and instead glanced at Doctor Tot. The good doctor let out a chuckle, his whiskers

swishing as he continued, “I know that Lindblum traditions are different, but here in Alexandria, a royal marriage is much more of a contractual affair. You needn’t do much of anything at this point.”

Ugh, “Affair” was right. Zidane gave a thoughtful pout, scrunching his nose up in disgust. ‘That *does* sound like something nobles would do. So wait.’ He glanced at Garnet, whose smile in his direction was slightly drunken. “This is it, right? Marriage and everything? That’s what we’re talking about, right?”

The queen flicked his nose genially. “Doctor Tot just *said* that, Zidane. I don’t think he’s too taken to the idea (I’m going a little fast, after all), but I was thinking about how much I missed you when you were in Lindblum, and I thought to myself that I didn’t want to lose you.” She turned to him, looking him in the eye as he considered where this was going. “So what I’m saying is that if you want, I’d like to marry you, is all.”

Zidane stared at Garnet, his brows furrowed in intense concentration. “...So that’s what’s going on.” The genome hadn’t been thinking about marriage, to be honest, but everyone else was basically already calling him prince, and the only person who *didn’t* want him around was Elizabeth,

and frankly, Zidane didn't quite care what she wanted at that point.

The genome didn't even have the time to consider the pros of the arrangement (aside from *marrying the hottest woman on the damn planet*), for Doctor Tot was already piping up, "There is one other thing, Your Majesty," he began, pushing his glasses up his nose. Both of their attention was on the miniature scholar, and his mustache drooped as he frowned in consideration. Finally, he took a deep breath and looked up, 'Your Majesty, I have been thinking about the land of Zidane's birth. Terra, was it?' He looked at Zidane, whose brow was furrowed in confusion, before turning back to Garnet with a serious, worried expression. "I am afraid that, perhaps, the two of you may not exactly be... 'compatible'."

There was utter silence. Garnet and Zidane looked at each other, completely bemused, before turning back to Doctor Tot. "*Excuse me* !?" the genome cried. He was pretty sure that the one time he saw Garnet naked that night a while back, neither of them grew *tentacles* or anything. "What do you mean 'not compatible'!?"

“Like two animals that appear similar, but are so genetically different, they cannot produce viable offspring.” Doctor Tot pushed his glasses back up his nose. “A mule might have a healthy birth, but they rarely give birth in turn.”

Zidane choked in disbelief. “Are you comparing Dagger to a *mule* !?”

“I’m comparing her to a horse, actually.” Doctor Tot’s awkward demeanor was alleviated by Zidane’s horror, and a smile appeared under his whiskers, ‘A beautiful, purebred mare and a lowborn jackass, to be perfectly clear.’ His smile didn’t falter, even as Zidane shrugged. Hey, props to him for calling it like he saw it while also being right on a technicality. “The point is, I am worried for the marriage later on down the line. What if it is physically impossible to produce heirs? And even if you could, would they be viable? Would *they* be able to have children of their own?”

And there was the rub. A royal was free to marry whomever they wanted, but they had to consider their children, or in this case, the lack thereof. Garnet didn’t pull away, but her touches were a little less needy, and Zidane’s hands were clammy even as they held her waist. The entire room was quiet as

they considered what course they might take, and finally Zidane let out a deep, resigned sigh. He turned Garnet to face him, and he looked into her eyes with a sad, understanding smile. “I’m sure there are others, Dagger. Nice men who will give you strong, beautiful kids that I just can’t. I may not be a ‘prince’, but as long as we’re together, I don’t mind being a ‘consort’.” He was used to being cast aside; it was a part of who he was, where he was born. He didn’t want to say he *preferred* it this way, but this was the future of Alexandria they were talking about, and Zidane understood it if Garnet had to draw him aside for someone—

“No,” the queen said curtly, taking his hands and practically crushing them in hers, ‘I care for you too much, Zidane. I don’t want to share you with anyone, so you shouldn’t have to share me!’ She took a breath to steel herself, and she squared her shoulders. “We’ll find a way to figure this out; we always do.” She released her breath, and her expression softened into a maternal smile before she pet his hands reassuringly. “We always do.”

Zidane searched his lover’s features, his hands trembling with emotion. He didn’t want to cry, really; especially not in front of Doctor Tot, but after all of this, after watching Steiner and Beatrix nearly

get separated... after worrying about being Alexandria's sole Heart... after wondering if he would even be living there the next decade...

Everything came spilling forth, and he finally coughed out a sob, wrapping his arms around Garnet gratefully. "Thank you," he whimpered, feeling so relieved, "Thank you so much, Dagger, I don't. You can't know how much that means to me...!" To know that no matter what happened, whatever came to pass, that he would have a home he could go back to, to have a family that would love him. His brothers in Tantalus were always there, but they weren't *Garnet*, and hearing, finally, that the woman he loved more than his own life would choose him over her kingdom... He couldn't take it any longer.

The queen reached up to hold him assuredly, wrapping her arms up from under his armpits so she could support him as he cried into her shoulder and clung to her like she was the last person on Gaia. "Of course... of course, Zidane. You're my canary, and I would love nothing more than to keep you safe in the cage of my bosom," she said, quoting *I Want to Be Your Canary*.

Zidane nodded, understanding the reference, but he couldn't help himself. "I *do* like your bosom a lot..."

"There we go, that's the Zidane I know," Garnet replied, kissing him on the temple and squeezing him tighter. "...You know, you really *do* get clingy when you're sad..."

"I said I was serious about that," the genome muttered into her collarbone, sounding a little scandalized. He took a deep breath and gave her a quick squeeze in return. It was then that he heard the click of a door that signaled that they were truly alone, and he allowed himself to let his tears spill forth fully, knowing that the only person who could see it was his beloved. He practically fell on Garnet, who supported him with a coo and leaned on the table with a knowing smile. Zidane could hardly handle the feeling of absolute security, and he clutched her even tighter.

"There there," she murmured, kissing him again and massaging his back. "We're here, together, and nothing will ever change that."

"Y-yeah," he agreed, nuzzling the crook of her neck. He prayed, more than anything, that she would be right.

16. The World Continues to Turn

Garnet and Zidane spent some time alone in her throne room, holding each other close. The queen was so happy to be able to support her love at this point, and the two held on tightly as Zidane sniffled a little, and it made Garnet's heart soar to know that he cared for her so much. She hugged him tighter and kissed him on the cheek. "Come on, let's go get you washed up. I think you need a nap, too," she said, trying not to sound as motherly as she felt at that moment.

Zidane didn't even tease her for her tone as he took a deep breath, squeezed her back, and released her. He wiped at his eyes and smiled, chuckling at the sight he must have made. "Yeah, s-sounds good," he replied. Garnet reached out to take his hand, and together, they walked off towards her bedroom....It sent a thrill up her spine when she considered the fact that in a short while, she could start calling it *their* room.

"I'm sorry," she began as they continued their walk, "I didn't know that our talk would affect you

so much. It seems like you're taking a lot of this to heart, but you don't need to worry. I know that being a prince consort isn't a normal 'job', especially not one of your expertise, so please don't feel like you have to force yourself."

Zidane shrugged in response. "Eh, Doctor Tot said that your dad wasn't really prince material either. Apparently he kinda grew into it." Garnet halted and whirled to face Zidane, her eyes wide. Since when did he learn about her father from before he married her mother? Especially things that even *she* didn't know!? "Oh, crap, did you even know that? Oh jeez, sorry, maybe I shouldn't say anything else."

Garnet watched him a little bit more before she nodded and dropped her head. He was right, she supposed. It was best to hear it from Doctor Tot himself instead of by a second-hand account. "Well, either way. You shouldn't have to feel like you should be like my father. You're *you*, not him."

It was at that point that they arrived at her bedroom, and Marilyn saluted them. She glanced at their held hands, saluted the queen once again, and moved to patrol further from the door with a wink at Garnet. The young queen glanced at her with a

confused blink, but when Zidane leered at her, she realized what the guard had assumed. She rolled her eyes, opened the door, and Zidane immediately slumped over to the sofa and flopped onto it with a groan. “I get what you’re saying,” the genome said, picking the conversation up where they left off, “But like, I dunno, the doctor was telling me about being Alexandria’s Heart, and I guess I’m just feeling a little responsible, you know?”

Garnet clucked her tongue in understanding. After closing the door, she moved to sit on the sofa, and the queen took his head in her lap. “Oh Zidane, don’t worry so much about that. That ‘Heart’ thing is just a saying. No one’s going to expect much from you.” She paused, suddenly realizing what that might imply, and she chose her next words carefully. “I mean that... You already make people love you just by being you. You don’t need to change yourself at all to be loved by everyone.”

Zidane took a deep breath, his tail flicking, and he turned his head so his nose pressed into her belly. Garnet smiled at the adorable gesture. He must have appreciated that she was still wearing her leotard; he always loved the stupid thing, although she couldn’t understand why, really. “I just... I was thinking about... I dunno... when I was in Lindblum...” He

took a deep breath, taking in her scent and kicking his foot over the side of the sofa, “Everyone was so worried about Beatrix. Myself included. I wasn’t sure if we were going to be able to save her. Hell, if Judge Noah didn’t listen to Breireicht, there would have been nothing we could have done. I was... so scared. But if *I* was scared, it made everyone else worried. They were looking to me, and I had to help everyone feel positive, and *damn* , it was exhausting. I don’t know how you do it.”

Garnet giggled, and she ran her fingers through his hair. His eyes closed, his breathing evening out, and she cocked her head, “Sometimes, I didn’t know how you were able to lead us outside of the castle. It felt like things were impossible sometimes, but you always managed to keep us on the right path. You saved Eiko, you saved the world... you saved *me* .”

Zidane opened his eyes, and he turned to look up into hers. His own began to mist as the hands on his chest began to tremble. “I couldn’t save him,” he whispered, “I couldn’t save *him* .”

Garnet halted, realizing why he was so scared of losing Beatrix. Why he seemed so scared of Lindblum the whole time. She reached out and

caressed his cheek gently. “Oh, Zidane. I’m sure he appreciated that you tried.”

“I just... I wanted. To show him that this world was worth saving. That life was worth living. I couldn’t... I...”

“You did, you did,” Garnet said, shushing him by wiping a tear from the corner of his eye, ‘You showed him. You showed him that he was loved, by pushing to save him even after all he had done. How could he not have seen that after everything you did?’ She could hardly believe he wanted to do so, after the vitriol they had spewed at each other previously in their adventure. “...You’re so brave, to forgive him so easily....I wish I could have done that.”

Zidane searched her eyes, and he lifted his hand to caress her cheek in return. “You did,” he whispered, his smile returning, “You were so brave, to forgive Brahne without a second thought. I don’t know if I could have done the same thing with Kuja if you hadn’t shown me your own resolve...” She sucked in a breath, and her heart skipped a beat as he pushed himself up to look at her face-to-face. “Dagger, you’re the bravest person I know.”

The queen... the young summoner girl reached up and placed her other hand on his other cheek. She held him there as her heart began to pick up its pace, and she trembled, her eyes filling with tears of her own. “And you’re the bravest person *I* know.”

He wrapped his arm around her waist, and she didn’t even give a surprised gasp as he drew her closer, kissing her deeply. She responded in kind, and the two pushed forward, their kisses portraying their feelings. They were desperate and needy, showing each other just how much they needed of each other...

Their love came through their actions, loud and clear.

Adelbert Steiner tromped through the castle with a bag of personal belongings strapped over his shoulder, and for the first time in a long while, he had the female guards giving him the time of day. Of course, it wasn’t actually about him, but about Beatrix. “What happened, Captain Steiner?” Laura asked, wringing her hands in worry. “General Beatrix is okay, isn’t she? She’ll be back soon, right?”

Steiner opened his mouth, but he wasn't sure exactly how to respond. "She is... spending the night at another location at the moment. I am collecting a change of clothes for her." He shouldered the bag to make a point.

"But she'll be back soon!?" Laura pressed, following next to the captain and huffing indignantly. "We've been waiting for her to come back! What the hell was Lindblum thinking, keeping her from us?"

Steiner grumbled, his temper rising. "I know not when she will return, or even if Queen Garnet will allow her to enter the castle again. We will hear the news soon."

Laura grew more insistent, and she practically walked in front of the captain with a snort. "What is Her Majesty thinking!? She can't just remove the general from the—"

"Would you quiet down for just *one* moment!?" Steiner shouted, silencing the guard and freezing her in place out of fear, "Get out of my sight, I have more important things to think about than your flagrant disregard for Queen Garnet's rules!"

Laura let out an enraged howl and stormed off, infuriated. The captain snarled in reply, willing himself to ignore the piercing stares of the other women, all of whom were incensed that a lowly Pluto Knight was shouting at their friends like that. Instead, Steiner moved forward towards the men's lockers, slamming the door open with such a bang, the three knights inside jumped in surprise. Blutzen and Kohel hid their Juugil Mystery Novels (unallowed only in the sleuths' hands because they would read them instead of actually going on patrol) behind their backs, and Laudo very nearly spilled his inkwell all over the table in fear.

"Oh, uh, Captain!" Blutzen called, tossing the book on the floor behind his feet. Kohel kicked it under his own feet as Blutzen took a step forward, "...Uhm uh, 'sup?"

Steiner couldn't even bother chastising the partners and stood over Laudo and his most recent manuscript. "Oh uh... Hello, Captain. How's Lady Beatrix? I remember you going to meet her." He sniffed a little, and his eyes narrowed in slight disgust. "Seems like you ran over to see her." More like smelled like.

“You can ask her yourself,” Steiner replied, hefting the bag back over his shoulder and setting it down at the table next to Pluto Knight IV. “Stand and deliver, Laudo!...Quite literally, in this case. Here’s the address. Take it and go.”

Laudo let out a cough as the captain handed off a slip of paper, and the knight read it off with a blink. “Oh...! This is in the bougie district, isn’t it? You didn’t tell me your family was loaded!”

Steiner hissed, thrusting a finger into Laudo’s face. Number IV let out a squeal and raised his hands in surrender. “I don’t want to hear another word from you, Laudo! Just do as you’re told!”

“Yes Sir, Sorry Sir, Right Away Sir!” Laudo cried out in reply, grabbing the bag and saluting the captain before charging from the room. Blutzen and Kohel chuckled at each other, but they stopped when Steiner whirled to glare at them.

“And as for you! How many times have I told you to stop reading those blasted books when you’re on duty!?”

The Pluto Knights’ lockers were rowdy that day, just as usual.

Beatrix let out a grunt as she tore her petticoat's dress up the side, and she tested out her modifications by taking a few steps around the living room. She let out a huff and dropped into the chair at the kitchen table. "How do people *live* like this?" she asked no one in particular.

"Live like what?" Simone asked, wandering into the room with a bright smile. She noticed Beatrix's 'enhancement', and she squealed in delight. "Eheheheee, that's so cute! I have a cute skirt we can try that on, what do you say?"

Beatrix muttered to herself before speaking up, snapping at her wardrobe. "This wasn't a new fashion statement, I just... I don't like skirts or dresses or... you get the idea."

Simone's smile faded, and she dropped her hands to her own dress, her expression downcast. "I didn't... mean anything by it, I'm sorry, I just..."

"You didn't do anything," Beatrix replied amicably, smiling at the woman, 'I suppose for you it *could* be a fashion statement. Just bring me whatever you want mangled, I suppose?' She looked down at her petticoat, "...Although maybe a cut would be better, then you can sew the hem so it won't fray." She looked up at Simone as the younger

Steiner settled in her chair across the table, and the pariah watched her movements. Beatrix bit her lip, unsure of what to do or say. She was so used to shouting at her underlings to get them to speak up, she wasn't sure how to interact with civilians.

...But she promised Adelbert that she would at least *try*. “Look, Simone. Uhm... Simmie?” The younger Steiner looked up at her nickname, and the pariah placed her hands on the table. “I noticed that... you get quiet when Adelbert's not around. Is everything alright?” Was she intimidated by her, despite the fact that she wasn't a general, not anymore?

Simone blinked at the question, but she smiled shyly in reply. “Well, I dunno, I know a lot of people don't mind it when a woman speaks her mind, but uhm... sometimes I say things that makes people... uncomfortable around me. I prefer not to say things until I know how people will react to it.” She looked up at Beatrix before casting her eyes back to the table. “You know how it is.”

In a sense, Beatrix assumed, although she was a general for so long, she had begun forgetting how it felt to not be idolized by everyone she met. Even Adelbert, in his own way, worshipped the ground

she walked on. The only people who had stood up to her in years were Garnet and Brahne, and they were the only two people whom she respected enough to stand above her...

...And if she hadn't respected the late queen enough to follow her commands, perhaps she would never have been in this mess.

...Shaking the thought from her mind, she looked up at Simone, who still looked a little lonely. The pariah tried to think about the positive aspects of her predicament: she was alive, Adelbert's child would have their parents, and Simone now had someone to speak to....A thought occurred to her, and she leaned forward with an attempt at a genial smile. "Well, you may speak your piece around me, Simone. I swear, I have heard everything under the sun, and you shan't offend me. Remember, I'm dating your *brother*."

Simone giggled in reply, that small bit of her previous personality shining through. "That's true. I really do like what you did to your dress. It's a little, flirty, I suppose?"

"I suppose," Beatrix agreed, looking down to inspect it. She hadn't been thinking of that when she tore it up, but now she could see why Simone might

have reacted to it so. “I also noticed you live alone. Are you thinking of dating soon?” the pariah asked with a smirk and a wink.

Simone burst into red, very similarly to the way Adelbert did when he was being teased about sex, and she dropped her face into her hands. “It’s uh... I’m not very... very good at it, you see,” she began, “And uhm... the women of the army have spoken about you so very much, so I thought maybe... I could get some tips, you know...?”

Beatrix let out a chuckle, but before they could continue that line of thought, there was a knock on the door. The pariah stood with a smile. “Rest, you’ve been preparing the house for me; I’ll get it.” Simone let out a grateful sigh and flopped onto the table as Beatrix walked to the door. When she opened it, she was greeted with a salute from Pluto Knight IV.

“Lady Beatrix! I have your possessions!” Laudo announced, gesturing to the bag before hefting it over his shoulder and dropping it to the floor at the doorstep. Beatrix let out a sigh at the way he manhandled her things, and she let out an unamused snort when his eyes fell on Beatrix’s new fashion statement. “Oh. You uh... you have a little uh, cut

there, on your dress,” he noted, pointing at her white leg as it peeked from beneath the fabric.

“I noticed, thanks,” she said, picking up the bag and placing a hand on her hip. “You want I should tell Captain Steiner you’re staring?”

Laudo snapped up to look her in the eye, his own eyes wide with fear. “No thanks I’m terribly sorry my lady I’ll just leave you to it BYE!” and he was down the street before she could even blink. Sometimes it was a wonder that the mere mention of the blushing oaf she called a boyfriend could instill such fear in the Pluto Knights, but then again, she was talking about the *Pluto Knights* .

She let out a soft, good-natured sigh before she walked back into the Steiner home. It was time to help Simone make a fashion statement.

17. Where to Go From Here?

That night in Alexandria Castle, Garnet's room was given a wide berth by the guards of the castle, and for a few hours, nothing in it stirred. Doctor Tot was right; the queen needed to take a moment to just relax.

...Zidane was right as well. Sex was a *wonderful* stress reliever. As the queen lay in her bed, staring up at the silken drapes the covered it, all she could think of was the exquisite feeling of security and love as the man she trusted and cared for above all others gave her her first real sexual experience, and by the heavens...

...She already missed him being inside of her. Turning softly, she watched his naked form, curled contented within the sheets of her bed, and she blinked in amusement as she considered how satiated he looked, tail wrapped around his leg like that.

When she shifted and raised her arms above her head, however, she could feel the awkward feeling of dried salty sweat rub against the sheets, and she scrunched her face up in annoyance at how musty

and dirty she felt. Slipping from the bed, she toed across the room towards the bath, leaving Zidane to nap the night away. He probably wouldn't be awake until the early morning at this point, and, well... it would be nice to show him that she wasn't so needy, despite the cold of the night air almost making her snuggle back into the bed to she could spoon her lover and steal his body warmth. He was just as sticky as her, and she didn't want to stay like this all night.

After a quick scrub down (sponge baths weren't her usual fare, but she learned about them while on the road, and they *were* fairly quick), the queen was dressed and out the door, braiding her hair over her shoulder as she walked. Marilyn was still there, at her post a few meters away, and when Garnet emerged from her room, the guard saluted her. The moment the queen passed by, however, the guard gave a whistling whoop. "Get it, Your Majesty!"

"Please," Garnet insisted, her nose in the air, "Must you be so crass?"

"Please tell me what he did with that tail of his," Marilyn pled, following behind the queen, 'It must be really useful under the sheets!'...Garnet whirled to stare at the guard incredulously, and she coughed

and looked away, “Not that I’ve been thinking about it a lot, just... I assume.”

Garnet ignored her guard, and instead pointed towards the door. “Just... I’m busy, back to your post, Marilyn.”

The guard saluted with a wink. “It wouldn’t do to have something happen to Alexandria’s new treasure, now would it? Your wish is my command, Your Majesty!” Garnet shook her head good-naturedly before continuing on, leaving her guard behind to keep watch over her room and her treasure.

She wandered through the castle, a specific destination in mind. As she passed from the castle to the barracks, she ignored the stares, salutes, and bows from the guards and walked straight to the armory. She wasn’t surprised to find the Pluto Knight Captain was there as well, for Save the Queen had been hung on the wall for safekeeping. Steiner stared up at the sword silently, completely unknowing that his queen had entered the room. When Garnet coughed to announce her presence, Steiner nearly jumped and turned to look at his sovereign. “Oh! Your Majesty!” he saluted, “May I assist you in some way?”

The queen nodded cordially and gestured for him to be at ease. When he dropped his arm, the two turned to look up at the great sword, and Steiner let out a lonesome sigh. It wasn't hard to assume who was on his mind. "Her leaving the castle will be a loss for us all," Garnet began, hoping to show just how much she meant to all of them.

The captain took a deep, cleansing breath, "I... agree. Bea... trix was one of the greatest. How can we possibly consider who can replace her? Who could possibly wield Save the Queen now?" There wasn't a single person who deserved to hold it, after the great deeds the former general had done.

Garnet let out a soft sigh. "I've been thinking of that as well," she admitted, 'Regardless of the rest of the world's feelings, I think that Alexandria will always remember her as one of our greatest heroes.' She bit her lip and rubbed her arms, looking, for once, a little small. "...I have given some thought about who might wield the sword in her place, however. It might not be the same, but it's the next best thing."

Steiner nodded at his queen, his frown neutral rather than angry, "I do not envy your decision, Your

Majesty. Know that I will stand by your side with whomever you choose.”

The Alexandrian queen nodded softly, considering the ramifications of her decision, before she looked up at Steiner with a smile. “Then I’m glad I ran into you here. I have been considering this ever since I received the letter from Freya... Steiner, there’s only one person who has ever been on my mind who has the strength of will to wield Save the Queen in Beatrix’s stead.” The captain watched Garnet, an eyebrow quirked in confusion, but she wasn’t deterred. “Steiner, it’s *you!* You’re the only one I can think of who can replace her. You have done nothing but assist Alexandria in every way you can! You deserve recognition for your work. *You* should be the general of Alexandria, don’t you think?”

The Pluto Knight Captain stood there, his mouth agape, and Garnet took a step forward to smile at her friend. “I’ve seen you in battle, you’re brave enough to deserve this honor, and of all the people in the army, I trust you the most...!” She reached out to place a hand on his arm, but she was surprised when he recoiled, as if in horror. She pulled her hand back and held them up to her chest, her surprise not quite leaving. “Is something the matter, Steiner? I know

it's a little surprising, but I would think that you wouldn't be that surprised...!"

"Your Majesty..." Steiner began, swallowing to wet his throat, "I said that I will stand by your side no matter what... but I must first ask if you are thinking clearly. Think for a moment what the rest of the guard will think if they hear they must take orders from a man. There would be an uproar. It can't be done...!"

Garnet paused, her brow furrowed in thought, before she shook her head and put her hands on her hips. "But I gave you my blessing. I *appointed* you! They wouldn't dare deny my wishes!"

"Not to your face, perhaps, but, Your Majesty, all we've wanted was peace and stability in our kingdom, and naming the first male general in the same generation that our gender has even been allowed to *become* knights... This isn't the time for social reform." Garnet finally took a moment to consider the captain's words, but before she could say anything in response, he let out a soft sigh and shook his head. "O-on the other hand, if this is truly what you want, my lady, I have come to trust you in all things. My job is to assist you, no matter what, and I *shall* do it."

Garnet nodded, crossing her arms and biting at her lip. “I think I understand. I’ll take some time to... consider other potential ‘suspects’, as it were.” There was already the Lieutenant General, Gina, but Garnet wasn’t on good terms with her, and she didn’t want to have to deal with her much more than she already did. Although, to be fair, she didn’t want *Steiner* to have to deal with her either. Now that she thought about it, she could hardly imagine Gina handling the fact that *Steiner* was her superior. “Thank you for being honest with me, Steiner. I want you to know that I appreciate it, truly. It’s stuff like this that makes me want you to be at my side, the way Beatrix was. You’re surprisingly perceptive sometimes, after all.”

Steiner stood at attention, puffing himself up pridefully. “I’m pleased that you consider me so, Your Majesty...” and yet, wait... “I’m *surprisingly* perceptive...?”

Garnet smiled and pat the captain’s arm. “Oh Steiner, I’m sorry to say that Mother didn’t name you captain for your *wit*. To be fair, I find your strong sword arm much more useful to me than Doctor Tot’s brains and intelligence at times. I appreciate everything you do for me, Steiner. Thank you.”

The scowl that the Pluto Knight Captain wore was deep, but the humble blush that crept up on his face showed that he appreciated the sentiment. “You honor me, Your Majesty.”

Perhaps so, Garnet thought to herself as she took her captain’s offered arm and they moved to find themselves some dinner, *But it’s well deserved*.

Alexandria Castle was abuzz with gossip the next few days, as even Alexandrian Knights and Pluto Knights spoke to each other about what had happened around the castle, and the castle seemed to take on a lackadaisical feel to it. Steiner was annoyed, but he couldn’t tell the women to get a move on, and Gina seemed to be much more interested in speaking with the queen instead of actually leading the troops, much to Garnet’s chagrin.

Zidane, meanwhile, had begun hopping around happily ever since that first night with his brand new *actual* lover, and the genome was soon wandering around the city of Alexandria, helping rebuild buildings and telling children stories while their parents worked in more dangerous areas. He even

met up with the various Alexandrian knights and took stock of what was needed so he could forward the information to Garnet or whomever else could utilize it best.

Marilyn had done her best to tell everyone what she had heard from that night's post, and while it wasn't anything *obscene*, she made sure that everyone knew what had happened, and soon Garnet, Zidane, and even Elizabeth couldn't go a few feet in the castle without people getting excited about their queen bringing her relationship with the genome to the next level. Garnet ignored most of the questions, but Zidane puffed himself up, as prideful as a peacock who was surrounded by suitors.

It was Elizabeth who was getting worried for her cousin, and during one of their mornings together, when she was helping Garnet put up her hair and get her dressed, the lady-in-waiting spoke to her queen about her feelings. "Your Majesty, Cousin, may I speak my mind?"

"Of course you may, Beth, you always can," Garnet replied, looking at her cousin's eyes through the mirror, "You look tense; did something happen?"

"Nothing to me, inasmuch," Elizabeth replied, pulling at the queen's hair to make sure not one

strand was out of place as she braided it down, “however, I’m concerned about your relationship with the monkey-boy, Zidane, was it?”

Garnet let out a sigh. She could very well believe that her cousin still hadn’t gotten over the fact that she didn’t like Zidane’s company in the castle, but to bring up that fact even now? No *wonder* she asked for permission to voice her opinion, because she would have verbally struck her down if she hadn’t. “I didn’t think it was your job to choose my partner for me. This isn’t the sixteenth century anymore, after all.”

Elizabeth frowned into the mirror, her lips pinching slightly, as if she had just eaten something sour. “Haven’t you considered what he might do to the kingdom? He’s not... human. Plus, while it isn’t exactly unheard of, I don’t think it will be generally well received if you end up pregnant out of wedlock.” Especially when he was just a commoner. At least a marriage would make him more than a slum-rat, *technically*.

Now it was Garnet’s turn to purse her lips. “I don’t think that’s going to be a huge problem,” she began, awkwardly avoiding the subject that had come up with Tot and Zidane. Elizabeth went quiet

as well as she finished her cousin's hair, and the two stood to smile at each other. "I appreciate your worry, Beth. Of all the people in the world, I would always consider your words... even if I'll eventually disregard them."

Elizabeth shook her head, crossing her arms and biting her lip. "You know that I'll always be there for you, Garnet. Just... don't let him hurt you. I'd never forgive myself if I let you get hurt, either physically or mentally."

Garnet shook her head and reached out to place a hand on her cousin's cheek, and her smile was the warmest she had given anyone before. "Oh Beth, my sweet cousin, I love your loyalty. I refuse to allow myself to be hurt either, just to help your conscience. If Zidane did anything untoward, I'll be sure to make sure he didn't get away with it."

Garnet's beloved cousin chuckled and shook her head. "...I'll do my best not to worry, Your Majesty."...She pursed her lips, however, and as the two turned to leave the royal's bedroom, "But you have to admit, he *is* rather unhygienic."

"Alas, not everyone is perfect, as you know. It helps that Zidane is just about perfect in everything else."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes so hard that Garnet couldn't help but burst into laughter.

18. Good News and Bad News

As time passed, Alexandria fell into a sense of calm as the kingdom returned to normal. It wasn't until a month had passed that a town crier walked into the middle of the town square with an important announcement to make. "Hear ye, hear ye! Queen Garnet herself shall make an appearance this afternoon at no later than fifteen hundred hours! There is an important announcement that she will make this fine day! Hear ye, hear ye!"

The crier was there for a few hours, making his announcement to anyone who might have missed it. Simone Steiner did not envy such a job, no matter how naturally loud her voice was. She heard the announcement when she visited the square for some foodstuffs, and her mind immediately went to both her brother as well as her new roommate. "I wonder if Trixie would like to see Her Majesty..." she thought to herself, "the poor dear hasn't done much outside of the house recently. I wonder if she's okay."

Simone and Beatrix had fallen into an easy schedule as roommates, but the younger Steiner was

able to tell that the former general was feeling the stress of simplicity. She looked depressed, and she wasn't sure what she could do aside from ask her brother what he would do to cheer her up...

When she arrived back at the house, she opened the door and announced her arrival. "Ms. Trixie! I'm back from the market!" she called, kicking the door closed. "You should come with me next time, it was boring without someone to talk to!"

Beatrix was standing in the storefront proper, looking around at everything from the small candies to the salted meats. It really was a grocery store, although in another corner there were small soap bars and other such toiletries for the house. A one stop store that old ladies could buy from without having to make the long trek all the way down to the market proper. She hardly noticed when Simone walked in with a cough. "If you want, you can run the shop for a few hours when I'm doing errands. That way you can do things, and you won't feel so bored..."

Beatrix turned to Simone, her eye searching the younger Steiner's, and the woman shrugged. "I don't think I'm cut out for running a shop. No head for numbers," she admitted.

“That’s okay,” Simone said with a smile, “Bert said that too, when he went to go join the knights. Papa lit into him, but I think he just was worried. No man had ever been let into the knighthood before; he didn’t think that they would let him in.”

They very well nearly didn’t. “They only let him in because he defeated me in single combat, it was a duel,” Beatrix said, sweeping to walk past Simone, who followed her back into the kitchen.

“Ohhh! He was so proud when he beat you! He was strutting around the room, right over there!” she said with a smile, pointing at the corner in question with an air of pride. When Beatrix turned to look at her, the young woman coughed and shrugged. “I mean, sorry, my lady, I don’t mean to sound rude.”

“Worry not, it’s alright,” Beatrix replied, shaking her head so her curls flounced in unison, “I had not gotten used to my lack of depth perception at the time, so I was not at my best; however, I had sorely underestimated Adelbert when I first met him. I... I am ashamed to admit that beforehand, I assumed that there was no man who could ever best me, even when I was at my weakest. I was too prideful, and it was my downfall that day.”

The former general set herself down at the kitchen table, and the two fell into an easy silence. The more Beatrix was with Adelbert's sister, the more she found that Simone had a sense of complacent kindness that made everything seem alright; she still wasn't sure what she was going to do about the child, but somehow, when she was with Simone, it felt like there wasn't a problem to be had.

Perhaps that's why, when Simone spoke up about Garnet's appearance, Beatrix was more intrigued than guilty. "It's supposed to be an important announcement. Do you think it's about you?"

The former general gave a gentle hum in reply. "I am not so egotistical (now, at least) to assume that it is only about me, but yes, it may be about the replacement general." She took a moment to briefly consider who the queen would decide upon: At this point, the most likely candidate would be Gina, even though she and Queen Garnet hardly ever saw eye-to-eye. Gina saw fit to stand under someone she could respect as stronger than her, and Garnet had yet to prove herself as a capable leader, not nearly as great as Brahne in her heyday. She was the strongest proponent of letting *Beatrix* take the throne after the former queen's death, and it was her charisma among the guard and the populace that made others

push for the same idea. There was no doubt in her mind that Garnet would choose Gina, if only to keep her happy and to appease the people who looked up to her.

Finally, the pariah looked up and nodded. “You were considering that we can go out to see Her Majesty, yes?...I’m a little worried about going out, to be perfectly honest. If people recognize me, then it might distract people from the Queen’s announcement.” Not to mention, Beatrix knew that she should quietly fade into obscurity. If people found her walking about, then who knows what they’d do or say? Ask her to come back? Riot if the queen did not allow her back? “I can’t show my face with so many people around, no matter how much I may want it.”

Simone took a moment to consider that point, nodding and humming knowingly. “I think I understand. I just think that maybe Bert will be there; he is one of Queen Garnet’s protectors, after all, and it would be fun if we went to go see him together.” Her eyes suddenly lit up, and she snapped her fingers. ‘Oh! Idea!!!’ Beatrix’s roommate jumped up and took the pariah’s hand, helping her stand. “We’ll get you dressed up! No one will

recognize you if you don't dress up like Beatrix! Let's try it out!!”

Beatrix pursed her lips; she didn't really like where this was going, but Simone was right. She *was* missing Adelbert so much... perhaps it wouldn't be so bad to blend into a crowd and watch him from afar....Now she thought she knew how Simone felt, without her brother able to visit very often...

Simone and Beatrix spent the next hour playing “dress up”. Eventually, the former general had her hair up, wrapped up in a shawl that covered her dead eye, and she wore her tight leggings with one of Simone's loose blouses, and soon she looked like a normal young peasant woman, standing alongside a bourgeois Steiner in a dress. When they wandered out to the town square, they blended in quite well with the crowds, who were all excited to see their wonderful queen in the flesh.

Beatrix could see that it was actually Garnet standing on the announcement stage, with Zidane on one side along with Gina and Adelbert off to the other side. Strange, Beatrix didn't see Elizabeth

about, and the pariah already felt a wave of worry. Could Queen Garnet honestly think that there were absolutely no people who wished to do her harm...?

“Psst!” Simone whispered, prompting Beatrix to turn to the exuberant woman, “Your brow’s furrowed. Everything okay? No worries! Everything’ll be fine. Bert’s there, after all!”

Beatrix sighed; she used to think it was *Adelbert* that was easy to read, but obviously she had picked up on a few cues from her boyfriend that Simone was able to pick up, being related to him and all. “I know that, Simmie, it’s just...” Ugh, now she had become a worrier like her lover. “No, you’re right. There’s no need to worry until something actually happens, yes?”

“Exactly!” the Steiner said happily, and the two went quiet as Garnet raised her hands to address the crowd who came to see her.

“My Lords and Ladies!” Queen Garnet called, her voice strong and loud, loud enough to grab everyone’s attention, “As your queen and regent, it is my great honor to be able to announce my engagement!”

There was a cry of surprise, and everyone turned to each other in alarm. An engagement!? Could it be? The people all looked up at Zidane, who was standing with the queen and dressed up a bit in more traditional Alexandrian attire. He didn't look like nobility, however, so the people stared and spoke to each other in confused tones. Beatrix and Simone turned to each other with a knowing look before turning back to see Garnet reach out and take Zidane's hand, drawing him next to her and once again addressing the crowd. "My people, may I introduce to you Zidane Tribal, who will soon be your newest Prince Consort and my husband."

Garnet released Zidane's hand, and he used the time to bow low to the people before straightening up just in time to turn to the queen, who had produced a ring of intricate make, which held the sigil of the Royal Family of Alexandria. "This was once my father's, and it will be your proof that you are bound to the fate of Alexandria. Wear it and know that of all the people in the world, I chose *you* to be the Heart of Alexandria, my love."

Zidane stood, stock still, as Garnet took his left hand and slid the ring onto his finger, which slid on perfectly. "Heh, so this was why you had Doc Tot measure this baby, huh?" he asked as he inspected

the ring for only a moment, before he dropped down to one knee, head bowed in humility and servitude. ‘Understood, Your Majesty. I shall do my best to care for your people.’ He lifted his head to look her in the eye with all of the adoration he could muster. “The fact that you would trust me with such an important task shows your faith in me, and I shan’t let it go to waste, Dagger.”

When he stood, the queen took his cheeks, and the genome was about to lean in for a kiss, but he halted when she leaned up on her toes and pressed their foreheads together, their noses touching ever so softly. “You can never waste my love, Canary of mine. Together, we will make Alexandria a proud nation once again.”

The fact that the two were so engrossed with each other, completely forgetting about even the crowds that had come to see their monarch, it was hard for the Alexandrian people to say that she *didn’t* care for this Zidane Tribal, and many of the lower class who had been helped by him, as well as the Pluto Knights and even much of the Alexandrian guards, began to cheer at the announcement, shouting happily for the genome. It felt almost like a repeat of the play, only Garnet was still wearing her tiara, Alexander’s

beautiful stone around her neck, and she wasn't punching him for his stupidity.

When she took the genome's hand and returned to addressing the cheering crowd, she felt that tingle of adoration, both for the Alexandrians and for Zidane. There it was; she was engaged, and soon the two could start their life together without worry. She would have cried if she didn't need to show strength to her people, and she stood tall as she spoke aloud: "That, my people, was the good news. And now, for the *other* news."

Here it was, the announcement of Beatrix's fate. The people waited with baited breath, and Garnet took a deep breath. "Beatrix of Alexandria was sentenced to become a pariah in Lindblum, Burmecia, and Alexandria, as well. In order to keep peace between all of the countries, I will never allow Beatrix into the castle again, and she will never be spoken of in any sort of positive note in my presence. She will be a pariah in life, and she will be remembered as a monster in death. For none are above my mother, the former Queen Brahne, and thus none shall be pardoned for crimes that Mother cannot."

She watched and waited as the Alexandrians let out a horrified cry and spoke among themselves, completely confusion at the news. Zidane squeezed Garnet's hand before turning and glancing at how rigid Steiner had become. He scanned the crowd, searching for Beatrix in the area, but before he could find her, the queen continued as Doctor Tot approached from the back of the stage. "And thus it is with a heavy heart that Save the Queen must pass on to the next general of our fine kingdom." She released Zidane's hand before turning to Doctor Tot and taking Save the Queen's sheath from his hands. She held the sword aloft before her before holding it close to her, as if the sword itself was her protector, rather than the person wielding it. "I have debated it long and hard to myself, but I have decided that there is only one person whose honor and duty is capable of touching this sword, much less wielding it."

Gina puffed herself up with pride, and Beatrix and Simone glanced at each other before nodding. They agreed; there was only one person who could possibly hold Save the Queen and defend the Kingdom of Alexandria from all who would harm her as her general, and that person was: "Adelbert Steiner, please, come forward and accept your role."

There was a collective gasp, surrounded by cries of horror among the crowd, and Gina trembled, her eyes wide, as Zidane whirled on his heel and clapped for his friend. Beatrix was floored, staring up at her monarch with a dropped jaw, as Simone jumped next to her and hollered in delight. “I knew it! I knew it! Congratulations, Bert! I knew you could do it, I just *knew* it!”

Steiner took a couple of steps forward, looking rather resigned about the whole thing, despite the fact that he should look incredibly proud. It probably didn’t help that the Alexandrians were whispering conspiratorially among themselves. How could it be that Queen Garnet would trust the safety of the entire kingdom to a *man*, of all people!?

Zidane was beaming proudly, looking like a proud brother, as Steiner approached the queen and knelt before her. “Your Majesty, you know that I am forever yours to command. I shall endeavor to protect you and your people for as long as I am able.”

Garnet closed her eyes and nodded, but before she could hold the sword out to her knight, the ceremony was interrupted by a loud, metal clank upon the wood, and everyone looked up to see that

Gina, the Lieutenant General, had removed her gauntlet and threw it to the floor with a furrowed brow. Queen Garnet peered at the knight, and Gina stood up to her full height as Steiner stood. She still had to glare up at him with a snarl. “Adelbert Steiner, I refuse to accept your leadership. You are no general! I will never kneel to you until you defeat me in single combat!” She placed her hand on the hilt of her sword, her brows knit in rage. “Draw your sword, *Captain* Steiner! I will put you in your place!”

“Are you serious!?” Zidane shouted, not one to let his friends handle anything on their own, “Queen Garnet gave him her blessing, and you’re going to go against your monarch’s decision!?”

“Zidane, hush!” Garnet hissed, causing her now-fiance to blink at her. She shook her head and gestured to the two knights, “Gina challenged Steiner to honorable, one-on-one combat. Are you going to deny him that?” The queen looked at the genome, but before he could answer her, he looked into her eyes and saw that she was giving him a *look*. Something that made him see that she had a plan...

...and that was what made the young man take a deep breath and defer to his fiancée. “Alright then, I’m not Alexandrian, so I’ll trust you.”

Gina and Steiner faced each other down, their faces set as Garnet and Doctor Tot walked simply from the stage to watch from a ways away near her contingency of Alexandrian guards. Zidane was at their heels, his expression one of bewilderment but trust in his lover. He may be beginning to love Alexandria, but he wasn’t born there, and he was willing to accept their more hair-brained customs as long as Garnet was sure it wouldn’t get his friends killed.

Not that he was worried about Steiner. There wasn’t a soul around who could best him with a broadsword. Except maybe Beatrix. Oof, actually, thinking on it, he definitely wouldn’t want to bet on a duel between them.

Speaking of Beatrix, the former general had to work to keep Simone from charging forward with a howl. “How dare that ugly harpy besmirch my brother’s good name!” the woman shouted angrily.

“Shut up, Steiner!” Derek the tanner, who was standing next to the two, hissed, “Ssgood entertainment, this is!”

“Ohhhh, if I could, I’d show that nasty witch what for...!” Simone growled, finally calming down enough for Beatrix to decide to release her. The young woman still flit about and fluffed out her hair, her face one of utter disgust.

“Remember, Simmie,” the pariah whispered into her roommate’s ear, ‘we’re trying *not* to attract attention.’ If she had to keep Simone in check and people learned of Beatrix’s identity, it might cause even more of a problem for her lover. “Just watch. You know Bert doesn’t need anyone to white-knight him.” Simone crossed her arms and huffed in reply, but she finally sat still and waited for the duel to begin.

It had technically begun the moment Queen Garnet announced so, but neither party moved as they stood on the stage and stared each other down. Gina looked to be sizing up her opponent as she drew her sword and held it before her, as even though she held very little respect for the *man*, she also knew that he had stood at Queen Garnet’s side when she led her people to save their world from Kuja, and even she knew not to underestimate the knight.

Steiner, on the other hand, looked like he was taking the duel in stride. He knew this would happen, that Gina would not take his ascension well, but the fact that Garnet allowed her to assault his honor so without biting at Gina to stand down proved that the monarch had a plan beyond simple blood sport, and if the queen wanted to make a statement through his actions, he would gladly play his part to the best of his ability.

The knight wasn't given much more time to consider his monarch's plans, as suddenly the lieutenant general struck, charging forward with a shout. However, the Pluto Knight's captain easily knocked her blade aside in a perfect parry, his own sword out and his face stoic as Gina blinked incredulously at how easily he tossed her aside. The two stared at each other as the crowd gasped, and one of the Pluto Knights shouted "That's my captain!" amidst the din.

Gina's brows knit, and she let out an enraged shout as she attacked once more, slicing at her opponent and meeting only steel on steel. Steiner shoved on his broadsword with only one hand, and the lieutenant general nearly fell backwards from his strength. He then resumed his previous defensive stance, his face one of *boredom* of all things.

The cheer that went up for Steiner was deafening, and Zidane crossed his arms with a shrug. “Was there ever any doubt you picked the right man for the job?” he asked his fiancée, who glanced back at the genome with a smug smile. Sometimes it was hard for even the queen to not feel a little proud of herself, especially when Zidane complimented her so.

Meanwhile, the duel continued in earnest, but it wasn’t much of a duel at all. Gina couldn’t lay even a scratch on Steiner, who barely moved amid his parries. He had trained with the fast moving Zidane, the aerial master Freya, and the merciless Amarant, and even such a big guy learned how to increase his own speed during their adventures, despite his armor. Finally, in one intense display of skill, the large man drew Gina’s sword to the side, throwing her off balance, before he used the momentum to needlessly twirl and bring his sword down straight at her neck.

The crowd screamed in horror, and Gina froze. The captain’s blade had stopped mere inches from her neck, and the captain drew back before sheathing his blade. “The duel is finished,” he said with a tone of finality.

The screams that erupted from the crowd were like nothing seen in Alexandria, at least not for a man in the military. The crowd surged forward to give Adelbert Steiner their blessing as their brand new general, and the guards that were sent to protect the queen ended up having to push the civilians back to protect the newly appointed *general* from being swarmed with well wishers. Letting out a relieved breath, Beatrix looked to the side to tell Simone that she had been right about her assumptions...

...only to find that her roommate had joined the other Alexandrians and snuck through the people. The pariah let out a gasp and searched the area, but didn't spot her until she slipped past the Alexandrian guards to clamber onto the stage and wave at her brother, who whirled around incredulously at her sudden appearance. "Yoo-hoo! I knew you could do it, Brother!!" she called out joyously, giving her confused brother a hug.

"Simone!? What are you doing— Why didn't the guards stop you!?" Adelbert cried as Simone squeezed his armor and released him. He turned to glare at the guards as they tried to keep the rest of the crowds away, but he stood at attention as Queen Garnet took the moment to approach the stage, and

he set himself down on one knee as Garnet held Save the Queen aloft in her hand.

What happened next was so sudden that some weren't even sure what had happened. When Gina saw the queen with Save the Queen, with the sword that she felt *she* deserved to wield, the woman drew up her sword, and she pushed forward with a shout. "The duel is not finished until I *say* it is!" she screeched. Adelbert turned, surprised, and he held his hand out instinctively to shield his sister as she cried out for him to be careful...

If Adelbert had both hands free, he might had been able to draw his sword in time, but instead, Gina got the drop on him, and he only managed to pull his sword out enough to block the blow just enough to not have his hand removed, instead, she slid a large gash along his unprotected arm, deep enough to cut to the bone, and the lieutenant general gave a cry of victory. "Hah! First blood! *First blood!* Never turn your back on an opponent, you fool!"

She had expected the people to turn to her immediately; *surely* such brutal and swift military personnel deserved all of the praise in the grand country of Alexandria, but the people gawked in horror, not necessarily at Gina's barbaric display of

dishonorable conduct, but from the livid expression of pure rage on Queen Garnet's facial features. It was enough to make even the battle-hardened Gina freeze like a rabbit caught under a fox's gaze.

"How *dare you*. How dare you!" Queen Garnet intoned, her voice not raised but her tone filled with such anger that everyone who could see her cowered under her fearsome visage. Even Simone, who was ready to push forward and attack the lieutenant general herself, could not bring herself to move, and instead Garnet strode past Adelbert, who had grabbed a kerchief to staunch the bleeding on his arm, and the queen stood before her subject with all the fury of a woman scorned.

"You treat your station as if it were a right, and you think to yourself that you can weasel even the smallest morsel of authority from *me*, the Queen of Alexandria!? You've been serving as lieutenant general for ten years, and you *still* haven't learned your lesson!? The only reason I *allowed* you to engage against my *chosen* general is so that my people could see his strength in both power and chivalry! The fact that you would strike at him when his back was turned proves that you are nothing more than a monster who believes that Alexandria's

bloody history should be continued rather than crushed.”

She whirled suddenly to face the throngs of Alexandrians, and she called out to the people, “is that what you want? To send your daughters off to war for some measly attempt at honor and glory? To fill *my* coffers with gold at the expense of you, the good people of Alexandria? Do you wish this great country to be built upon the bones and ashes of the deceased!?”

No one spoke a word, too surprised to even respond. Her voice was like thunder, her countenance like burning fire, her fury tempered in ice, and her stance as straight and true as the Allfather of Wisdom. As the spirits of her Eidolons lent her their strength, the people had trouble not falling to their knees in worship, and even Zidane’s eyes widened at how incredible she had become in that moment. He glanced at Steiner, who had turned slightly back towards the genome. Both were looking to the other for some sort of guidance, but no, this was the first time either of them had seen her like this.

Finally, the queen, satisfied that no one would attempt to take Gina’s side, turned to the woman as

she dropped to one knee and trembled. “I never liked you from the first, Gina. I remember telling Beatrix that I didn’t know what she saw in you. I remember her placating me with words of hope. She knew that if you only *tried*, you could move past your hatred and be someone *better* than what I originally saw. Today I see that, either from her teachings or your stubbornness, that will never happen.”

Garnet looked down on the trembling soldier, and the queen gave little in the ways of pity. “Of all the people in this country’s military, it is *you* who deserves banishment. You are hereby dishonorably discharged. I do not want to see you in the castle gates ever again.” She turned softly, waving at the woman dismissively. “Leave your sword here and begone from my sight.”

Gina didn’t know what to say. There was nothing *to* say. She simply lowered her head and took the sword from her side, her head still bowed in humility. The discharged ex-soldier placed her sword, still red with Steiner’s blood, and she stood to leave the stage.

The moment Gina’s shoes touched the cobblestone and she slid off, the people parted for her, no one moving to grant her even a modicum of

assistance. In fact, the crowds might have considered surging forward, to tear Gina apart for slighting their queen, but Queen Garnet's words continued to linger in their minds. Did they truly wish to continue Alexandria's bloody legacy? After seeing what had happened to Steiner, to Beatrix, to *Queen Brahne*, they were finally beginning to have their doubts.

The current queen, meanwhile, turned softly to take her knight's arm, and with a quick spell, she mended the man's wounded arm in front of his sister. Simone's mouth was agape, and she looked up at Garnet gratefully. "Your Majesty. There are no words..." she began just before Garnet raised her hand.

"Then do not worry. Your brother deserves all of this and more." Garnet turned once more, extending her arm towards Doctor Tot in a silent order, and the scholar brought forth *Save the Queen* once again. The young queen drew the sword and, though it strained her arms, she held it aloft and took a deep breath. 'Adelbert Steiner.' The knight immediately knelt before his monarch. "By my authority as Queen of Alexandria, I, Garnet Til Alexandros XVII, hereby dub you General Adelbert Steiner, my right hand and confidante in all things."

The cheers that went up throughout the square were so intense that Zidane felt a slight tingle in his spine, and when he turned to Steiner, he saw an expression of dumbstruck awe. The knight looked out over the people for a good minute before he regained his faculties and straightened up. He saluted the good people of Alexandria, whom he swore to serve until he died, and he sheathed *Save the Queen* with a proud smile.

There was a flash of color in the form of a sash that was once Simone's, and he caught sight of one brilliantly blue eye staring at him through the ocean of faces. Her smile was sad, and even though she seemed happy for his promotion, her expression was one of such worry that it made Steiner's blood run cold. It suddenly occurred to him that this promotion would cause their already fathomless gulf to widen even further, and the general broke into a cold sweat as Beatrix slipped into the crowd and disappeared.

For the second time in his life, the vows of fealty he made for the Alexandrian royal family seemed like fetters that threatened to drag him away from everything he loved in life...

...When Simone grabbed his arm and shouted her congratulations in his ear, she didn't realize his tears

weren't from joy.

19. Lieutenant General

The castle was abuzz after the queen's engagement; people were charging around the castle in a desperate attempt to make the place presentable for a wedding that would happen in a few months, not that Zidane even cared about a wedding. He prowled the halls with a smirk, letting the kingdom run like clockwork around him. It was strange, allowing himself to be a cog in the Alexandian Clock.

What was the craziest thing? Zidane definitely felt it was Steiner's promotion to general: Since Alexandria was a military state, it was the general who stood by the queen's side as her adviser; he was basically Garnet's second-hand. The idea of *Steiner* of all people being the second-most important person in the entire kingdom...! It was almost too much, especially because the general was far busier now than he was before. He rarely had time to pester his good friend, and lamented the fact to the rest of the Pluto Knights in their changing room. "What's a guy gotta do to raise a person's blood pressure around here?" The genome asked as Blutzen and

Kohel pored over a few notes about guard patrol routes.

“Couldn’t tell you,” Kohel, the new Pluto Knight II, said as he handed off the note to his partner, the new Captain of the Pluto Knights, Blutzen, “We’ve got our hands full here, so I, for one, welcome the fact that we’re not getting yelled at by the captain—er, the general.”

“Speak for yourself,” Captain Pluto Knight I muttered to himself, “General Steiner won’t get off my case about letting the Pluto Knights fall even further into obscurity. Can you *believe* that he yelled at me about not replacing Pluto Knight IX yet? Mullenkedheim’s Pluto Knight VIII now, and he’s getting all uppity about the Pluto Knights missing a member? Why do we even *need* a ninth member? Nine things are for chumps anyway!”

...An unsettling pall settled over the room as the three considered that strange fact. Blutzen, oblivious to the others’ silence, wrapped up the note, sealed it, and handed it off to Kohel. “Can you get this to Breireicht? I suspect he’s doing his morning exercises.”

“Right!” Kohel said with a salute before jogging off. Pluto Knight II paused and slowly turned, “I

meant that as a question, it's the *right* tower, right?"

"The left tower's still destroyed," Zidane said as he hopped off the table and stretched, "So yeah, right tower."

Kohel gave the genome a finger gun, clicked it, and jogged out. Zidane shook himself out of the stretch, letting his tail flip around before coming to a rest, and he smiled at Blutzen, "Good luck on Captain-hood, I guess."

"I just had the best idea!" Pluto Knight I cried, lifting up one of the Pluto Knights' breastplates, "*You* can be the new Pluto Knight IX!"

"Annnnd that's my cue to exit stage left," the genome said flippantly, pointing to the door and rushing out quickly.

As Garnet's fiance and general savior-of-the-known-universe, Zidane was basically allowed to have free reign of the castle, so when he went to visit the queen, Kathy merely saluted him as he entered the throne room.

"This is *impossible!*" he heard Garnet groan as she flopped onto her throne. Doctor Tot and *General* Adelbert Steiner were the only other two in the room at that point, and she could show her true colors as

she complained. When Zidane closed the door, however, the queen immediately sat up in surprise, “Who’s there!?” she demanded.

“Yo, Dagger, sorry, didn’t mean to startle you,” Zidane said, holding up a hand in greeting to the three. Steiner stood at the throne’s side, his hands pressed stately behind his back, similar to how Beatrix held herself when she used to do so, and Doctor Tot was jotting things down in his journal, mostly things that Garnet had been speaking of previously.

That same Garnet let out a croon the moment she saw her beloved, and she held out her arms for him to join her. Zidane didn’t need to be gestured to twice; he bounded up to her and leaned over her in her throne, wrapping his arms around her and giving her a long, lingering kiss. When they pulled apart, he settled himself down on the arm of the throne with a mirthful smile, his tail flicking back and forth, “So, I hear you’re having trouble? Wanna talk about it?”

“I hardly see how you can help,” Garnet replied, her mood souring at the mere thought of it. Zidane’s eyebrow cocked, and she looked away, a little embarrassed at how easily she went from happy to angered. Of all the things she should be to her

fiance, it shouldn't be *that*, "Well, it's just... we have a Pluto Knight Captain..." Zidane coughed, and Garnet glanced at him, but continued, "But we're missing a lieutenant general, one who can handle anything that Steiner's too busy to do."

Ohhh, that's why Garnet was in a *mood*. She still got really irked whenever Gina's name was brought up. She was forgiving, but she rarely ever *forgot* when she was wronged. Plus, Zidane knew the Alexandrian guards and how they treated the menfolk in the castle. The Pluto Knights, even when Beatrix was general, were a laughingstock, and the genome knew that the women only saw the queen's new fiance as royal eye-candy. There was no way that anyone was going to treat Steiner with the same respect they would a woman in his position.

...Hmm, except, maybe, for *one* person... "Far be it from me to tell you how to run a kingdom, but may I make a suggestion?"

Steiner huffed, crossing his arms angrily. "Zidane, please! As if you understand the true affairs of court! I would recommend keeping your big mouth shut, before you end up sticking your foot in it!"

The genome nearly coughed, he laughed so quickly. “Fair point, Steiner! Of all the skills I accept that you might know a bit more about, it’s Alexandrian court intrigue. But this isn’t intrigue, I swear.” He turned to look at Garnet, and she shrugged lightly, gesturing him to continue. It wasn’t like it hurt to get a suggestion. ‘I went out to Lindblum with Beatrix, right? And we brought along Breireicht, Dojebon, and Jasmine.’ He paused... but the three in the room simply stared at him. Zidane waved his hand as if showing off a new idea to his friends. “Y-you can guess where I’m going with this, I hope?”

The three went quiet, and a thoughtful pause lasted as they considered Zidane’s idea. “Are you saying that *Jasmine* should be the lieutenant general?” Garnet asked, blinking. Zidane’s tail flicked and he smiled; it was so cute when she asked him questions, it reminded him when they were on the road together. The queen let out a thoughtful hum and turned to her general, “What do you think, Steiner?”

The general’s scowl was impossible to miss. “She’s abrasive at the best of times, to say nothing of the *worst* of times. Why in the world do you think she would be a good candidate?”

“I saw her when we were protecting Beatrix,” Zidane explained, looking up at Steiner and definitely not missing the way Steiner froze at the mention of his girlfriend’s name, “Ol’ Jaz can be annoying when she’s up on her high horse, but she did her best for Beatrix, for Alexandria. You can do a lot worse than her; she’ll serve you well, Steiner. When the going gets tough, she’ll rise up and deliver, I know it. What do you say, Dagger?”

The monarch took a moment to consider that, and she cocked her head to the side. “Hmm, well, I hadn’t considered her until you brought it up, but now that I’m thinking of it. She’s a captain, like Steiner. I had specifically chosen her to go with Beatrix when we sent her to Lindblum, she was his ‘replacement’, as it were.” She paused to watch the way Steiner stiffened at the idea, and Garnet turned back to Zidane. “She has the respect of her peers and her subordinates, and if you trust in her, then I’ll trust in you, Zidane.”

Doctor Tot let out a thoughtful hum and jotted a few notes down as the queen reached up to take her fiancé’s chin, and Zidane leaned forward immediately to allow her to kiss him; he remembered hearing people joke about how a consort’s job was to look pretty and put out

whenever the lord wished it, but he was Zidane Tribal and there was rarely a time he *wasn't* willing to put out. When the two pulled away, the queen's fiance flicked his tail and kissed her temple. "I know you're a queen and all, but god, am I glad that we can't have kids. I'm looking forward to tonight."

Steiner let out a wheezing sound that made Zidane smirk wider (Finally, it had been forever since he got a rise out of his friend) and Garnet pinched the genome's arm with a smirk. "Just because we're not going to have children doesn't mean you can take advantage of it before our wedding, you silly monkey."

"Please," Zidane whispered lowly, leaning down to nuzzle Garnet's ear and make his lover gasp, "do you *really* want to say no?"

Garnet almost whimpered, but Doctor Tot's pointed cough caused her to remember where she was, and she turned away from Zidane and fluffed out her dress. "Don't you have anything *better* to do?" she asked, trying not to sound annoyed at how easily he charmed her.

"Implying he has *anything* to do, Your Majesty?" Steiner asked, cocking an eyebrow.

The genome let out a guffaw as he hopped from the throne, raising his hands in mock surrender. “Alright, alright, I know when I’m not wanted! I’ll see you guys around. Besides, there are other people I can pester, and if I don’t pester everyone in the castle, then how will they stay on their toes, waiting for me to pounce?”

“Surely, such a task can only be completed by the likes of you, Zidane,” Doctor Tot said, adjusting his glasses.

“See!? The Good Doc gets it!” the genome crowed in response before waving and trotting from the throne room. Garnet waved back and dropped back against her throne with a wistful sigh, sounding like a lovesick child. It was hard to believe that the queen was an adult when she acted that way.

“Hmph,” Steiner rumbled, putting his hands on his hips, “Finally, we can get back to actual work! I swear, he acts like our work has no merit at all!”

“Oh hush, you adore him too, Steiner,” Garnet insisted, earning a sputter from her general as she took Tot’s list and made sure to circle Jasmine’s name, “As much as you hate to admit it, at least.”

Steiner tried very hard to deny the accusations, but instead of actually saying anything, he spent the next minute scowling.

Word didn't reach Jasmine of her promotion until later that evening, when Steiner found her in the training hall with a retinue of new recruits. The captain gave her superior a distasteful frown when he clanked into the room, causing every woman to look to him instead of Jasmine. "If it isn't the illustrious *General* Adelbert Steiner. To what do I owe the honor of your presence, *Sir* Steiner?"

Steiner sneered in reply, already annoyed at this woman's attitude. He wasn't happy with the way his queen hung on Zidane's every word, and now here was proof that Garnet trusted too much in her lover than in people who actually knew what they were doing. "Captain Jasmine, I have a letter from Her Majesty; I recommend you read it alone, if you can. I can handle the recruits if you—"

"Ohhhh no, I'm not letting you take control over everything! Give-give me that!" she grunted, taking the note from the general and tearing it open with a snort. The line of recruits turned to each other with

confused looks as Jasmine looked over the paper announcing her promotion...

...and her brows knit together, her scowl rivaling Steiner's. She looked up at the general with a growl, "Is this a *joke*, Steiner? You can't stand me so you thought it would be funny to tell me that you want me around you so you can lord your promotion over me?"

"Are you serious?" Steiner roared in return, "Do you not see the wax with the *Queen's Seal* on it? Do you honestly think I would take Her Majesty's *seal* simply because I am a general? *She* was the one who decided to name you Lieutenant General, and believe me, I was against the idea from the first, but here we are!"

Lieutenant General Jasmine slipped the paper closed and scoffed. "Oh, so now *Her Majesty* hates me. What could she possibly see in this arrangement?"

Steiner let out a sigh and turned away, his scowl increasing. "It wasn't *just* Queen Garnet's idea. Zidane was the one who brought it up in the first place."

The moment the words left the general's mouth, Jasmine whipped her head up. "Zidane? Queen Garnet's Fiance Zidane? *He* said we should be working together? Goddamn. This can't be happening, that little *monkey* thinks he can—"

"—Her Majesty *can't* be thinking this is going to work out—"

"—The filthy little *wart* thinks he can waltz in and run Alexandria like it's *his* or something and quite frankly—"

"—Just *once* I'd like to pop him right upside the head and remind him who he's dealing wi—"

Both the general and lieutenant general halted their words and looked at each other, their eyes meeting as a small spark ignited between the two. The side of Jasmine's lips twitched into a smile, and she chuckled softly. "Well then, *General* Steiner. I suppose if I absolutely must... work with you as your second, it certainly would be worse than serving as just a lowly *captain*, wouldn't you say?"

"You aren't funny," Steiner snorted around the smile that he couldn't hide, 'but you have good taste in warts.' He looked up at the recruits, who had been ignored for so long they had all begun slouching.

“And look at your recruits! Jelly spines, all of them! Stand up straight, at attention!” He slammed his gauntlets together and every one of them cried out, trying to stand up straight before the general and his lieutenant. “Very well, I’ll leave you to it!”

“Oh, come off it, Steiner, I don’t need you telling me how to do my job!” Jasmine rolled her eyes as the general waved her off and strode from the room. The lieutenant general turned to look at her recruits, who had assumed they were allowed to be at ease despite not being spoken to, and she sneered as they began their whispers:

“Was that really General Steiner?”

“I saw him duel Gina. The man’s a whirlwind with his blade!”

“Who would have thought a man could be so strong?”

“I bet it was General Beatrix who—”

Jasmine barked so loud that the recruits nearly squealed in surprise. “No one told you to be at ease, you maggots! Stand up straight and let’s get to work, before I give you ten thousand push-ups to deal with, and then you’ll be *begging* for the sweet release of death!”

Steiner couldn't help but feel the smile on his face as he continued on to continue his work; perhaps this wouldn't be such a terrible thing after all...

20. Steiner Soiree

Zidane Tribal was beginning to truly get used to life in Alexandria. With Garnet returning to her duties of the royalty, and with Zidane pushing to help the people get back on their feet, given that he was the type to bounce back *onto* his feet quickly, his natural charisma and the fact that the people adored him helped morale skyrocket among both the commoners as well as the knighthood, especially the Pluto Knights, and when the first shipment of wood from the logging industry in Zamo Basin was delivered, it seemed that Alexandria was finally on the road to real recovery.

Zidane soon found that working with the people was a lot more fun than sitting in the castle and doing nothing, and as long as he gave Garnet a time he would return, she was content with letting him out of her sight without going into any real panic attacks like he had seen that time what seemed like forever ago. On the one hand, he *knew* Blank would make fun of him for allowing himself to be so “*whipped*” by Garnet, but he was beginning to learn, and to accept, that relationships, *real* relationships, were about accepting that people needed this-and-

that in order to function properly. Damn though, now that Beatrix wasn't in the castle anymore, Steiner seemed a lot more on edge. He knew that it really wasn't his business, but the genome was nothing if not a busybody when it came to his friends, and he wondered to himself how he was going to help his friend out with *his* relationship.

It was almost like someone was watching over him, Alexander, perhaps, some people might have said, as the moment Zidane considered what he might be able to do, he noticed a familiar hair color while wandering the streets of the city, and the genome cocked an eyebrow. The woman was gardening outside what seemed to be a two-story general store, and her hair was tied back in a braid that appeared to be done by a second person. Despite the shawl she was wearing, it wasn't enough to hide the edge of her red, braided hair.

For a moment, Zidane considered moving on; it wouldn't do to just wander up to her, only to discover it was another woman, but he supposed his busybodiness was seen as normal among the people of Alexandria, at least when it came to the queen's fiancé. If this wasn't Beatrix, at least she might understand that Zidane was the type of person to just wander up to a stranger just in case.

Not that he needed to worry, as the moment he called out to the woman, “Hey, Miss,” the woman turned towards Zidane, and the genome saw that her eye was covered by the shawl to hide the deadness of scar tissue. ‘It’s you, Beatrix!’ Zidane crowed, his hand on his hip, “I mean, I shouldn’t be surprised to find you *somewhere* in town; Steiner drew you off somewhere. Oh! Is this the Steiner household? I saw his sister, what was her name again?”

“Zidane, what are you doing here?” Beatrix asked as Zidane continued his rambling, “Don’t you have better things to do?”

The shut the young man up a bit, something that only really Beatrix could do, as someone who really was immune to the genome’s charms. Luckily, he snapped out of his stupor quickly and put a hand on his hip. “Really? Would you have preferred me to just sit around bothering the guards all day instead?”

Yes, to be frank. “You certainly like to make a habit of bothering *me* instead,” the pariah muttered instead. A slight smile appeared on the corner of her lip as she spoke, however, and she made no attempt to hide the fact that she was already enjoying having someone to talk to outside of the house.

It was at that moment that the door opened, and Simone walked out onto the step, “Trixie, what’s the matter!? Is someone bothering you?” She turned to frown at the person who was harassing a pregnant woman, but paused when she recognized who it was. “Oh! My Lord, it’s you!”

My Lord!? Zidane laughed out loud for a moment, stunning Simone into shock, and it only stopped when the genome took a deep breath and shook his head with a genial smile, “Just-just Zidane’ll do, and nah, sorry, I didn’t mean to bother anyone, I just wanted to talk to a friend of mine. Beatrix and I helped each other out of some tough scrapes, and she’s kind of also my friend’s girlfriend (‘We really gotta get that idiot to get to the next step,’ he added to Beatrix as an aside). Sorry for scaring you, really!”

Simone continued to stare at Zidane, confused, until she heard the word “Sorry” and suddenly nodded, “Oh! Well then, Zidane, I’m glad that you came to visit. I suppose it’s a little surprising that you’re friends with my brother, but you being Queen Garnet’s *fiance* and all...!”

Simone was used to rowdy eccentricity, and so the two fell into an easy and quick conversation,

despite the fact that Beatrix was rather lost. She rolled her eyes and went back to gardening out front. She was getting on in months, so much so that the physician claimed the child would be coming in a mere two months. She felt so much like an invalid, and it killed her to know that Simone had come outside to *protect* her, like she was a mere child.... But no, this was her brother's child. Simone was merely protecting the baby...

...It didn't feel that way sometimes.

"Yo, Beatrix, you with us?" Zidane asked, snapping the woman from her reverie. She turned to the man, and he gestured inside. "Simone is making lunch. You wanna eat it with us?"

Beatrix sighed, a good-natured smile on her face. "I think you mean, would *you* like to have lunch with us?" she asked, brushing past him into the house. Zidane sauntered up behind her, looking like he owned the place, as usual, and he gave a whistle as they entered the kitchen. "Jeez, the Steiners are insane. Nice home you got here."

"Thanks!" Simone proclaimed as Beatrix slowly settled down at the table with a groan, "Father worked very hard to afford it, which is why I would

feel *terrible* if we just... left it. Bert went to be a soldier, so I stayed to continue the legacy.”

Zidane watched Simone as she laid out the soup bowls, and the genome settled down but didn’t dig in until she herself had sat down herself. “That uh, that didn’t sound all that excited. You alright with all of this, Simone?”

“Huh?” the woman asked as she looked up. When she realized she was being addressed, she shrugged. “You can call me Simmie, if you want, and no, I’m fine with living here. I mean... No, no, I’m fine, really, it’s just...” She sighed and flopped forward, stirring her soup with almost a pout, and Beatrix cocked an eyebrow as Simone continued, “It’s just that... I understand that Bert’s busy protecting the citizens and *saving the world* and everything, but he-he’s the only family I have left, aside from Trixie here...”

Beatrix pursed her lips, not really sure how to respond to that, and Simone continued ranting, “And I guess I’m just lonely, okay? I spend all of my time working this place, I’m *not* as good a merchant as Father, and I wish... I just...”

Zidane listened to everything, and Beatrix and he both looked at each other. Beatrix was completely

flabbergasted; she knew she hadn't spoken to Simone a lot, not about personal things, but the fact that Zidane could get her to open up so easily... it was incredible. The pariah took a deep breath; it was nice that Zidane got her to open up, she supposed that, as the closest Steiner in the room, it was best to try to speak up and get her to open up instead. "Listen, Simmie, I didn't... I didn't realize that's how you felt. I'm sorry that I never thought about your feelings. I had only been thinking about myself."

Simone let out a gasp and held out her hands. "Oh no, Trixie, dear! You're, well, I'm just— you should be taking care of yourself as well!"

"Well, I mean, yes, but that's not the point. If you're not happy where you are, then we should help you get happier, is all." Beatrix groaned; she wasn't very good at words. She missed being able to use her sword; swinging a broadsword around a few times a day wasn't enough anymore, and even then, it felt a little dangerous to be holding weapons when she was pregnant. She didn't want Simone to worry and everything. "We really should do something to cheer you up."

Zidane suddenly coughed, nearly choking on his soup, and he raised a hand before looking up. “I got it! Let’s go to the castle, Simmie!” Both Simone and Beatrix looked up at him, and the genome winked at her; “I’m allowed in the castle, so no one’ll ask you to leave when I’m around. Let’s go invite Stein— er, Adelbert, out somewhere. You got me to go to lunch, so let’s get him over for dinner.”

The women were quiet for a moment, turning to each other. They had been living so quietly for the past month or two, so it was crazy that a young, betailed queen’s-fiance would practically barge into their house and offer to make their lives better. “Well, that’s very kind of you, Zidane, but I don’t—I wouldn’t want to impose...!”

“No imposition, obviously! I’m heading back to the castle soon anyway, we can go together....And if your brother *is* busy, then at least you’ll be able to set up a day when he won’t be, right? This is your *family*, and you deserve to be with them.” Zidane leaned forward, his eyes gleaming and his smile wide, “Besides, I know a lot more about your brother than he thinks I know, and that man loves the hell out of his family; I know he misses you more than he lets on, and it’s killing him that he can’t spend more time with you.”

Simone's eyes sparkled with a bit of hope that she didn't know she had lost until then. "...Do you really think so?"

"Simmie, I *know* so!"

Once again, the women looked at each other, and Beatrix gave Simone a reassuring smile. It wasn't a bad idea to get her out of the house once in a while, as well. "Go ahead. It would be nice if he could come visit us once in a while. Go tell him that."

Simone opened her mouth, but she stopped and shook her head. "You're right! We-we can at least try, right? There's no harm in that..."

"Definitely not!" Zidane announced as he sprung from the chair like an acrobat, "Let's go; Beatrix'll be fine on her own. She's one of the strongest women in the world!"

"'One of'?" Beatrix asked, cocking an eyebrow as Simone stood up to join the genome.

"Please, everyone knows there's no contest: Dagger's the best there ever was!"

Beatrix leaned on her fist as Simone and Zidane left the house together, and the pariah let out a sigh

and shrugged. Well, there wasn't much she could say to that!

Simone Steiner took a deep breath as she stepped off of the boat and looked up at the castle of Alexandria. She hadn't gone to the castle in, well, ever; she knew that her brother was busy with his duties, so she had never thought to visit him at his workplace. Plus, she was usually busy herself with the shop, but with Beatrix able to handle watching it during the quieter times, and with Zidane's insistence, it gave her the assurance to push on and speak to her brother.

The guards allowed her through, although she had a sneaking suspicion it was more for Zidane's sake than hers. He was Queen Garnet's fiance, after all! Despite the kindness that people sent her way with Zidane, the younger Steiner still felt out of place, or that she wasn't worth the respect that she was given. She ended up biting her lip in worry as she approached the castle with trepidation.

"Hey, Simmie, you okay there?" Zidane asked, hands in his pockets. The Steiner nearly jumped when she realized she was being addressed, and she

turned to the Genome with a blink. “Yo, relax! We’re not here to bite your head off; you’re an important person to Steiner— er, Adelbert? Ugh, that just feels weird to say. Anyway, if you’re important to him, then you’re important to me too. This isn’t just for you; this is for him too, okay? Think of it that way. He misses you, Simmie, just think about helping him out like that.”

She supposed that made sense, but it still didn’t sit well with her. Despite that, she tried to take his words to heart, and she took a deep breath before releasing it. “You’re right. I’m going to do my best, not just for me, but for Bert, too!”

“That’s the spirit!” Zidane agreed, reaching up to clap Simone on the shoulder. The woman gulped, but she nodded with a smile, and together, the two walked into the foyer of the castle proper.

The castle was, as usual, busy as people rushed to and fro, still trying to clean out the area and get necessary supplies out to people who needed it the most. Zidane wove through them easily, waving down soldiers and seeing them off after a brief conversation. “Hey there Breireicht! Working hard or hardly working? Yo Tiana, hows your mom? Doing well? That’s great, let’s all keep it up!”

“You’re well liked,” Simone said offhandedly, looking behind her at Tiana’s retreating form as the two walked leisurely towards the barracks.

Zidane shrugged with a chuckle. “What can I say? I just have that kind of face, you know?” and he winked at the Steiner with a roguish smile that made her giggle despite herself.

“Ugh, I knew you couldn’t handle being anything other than a flirt, Zidane!” a woman called out, and Simone let out a scared squeal when *Queen Garnet herself* approached with a refined sneer, and the woman found herself hiding behind Zidane despite the fact that she was taller than him by a few inches. The queen looked her over for a moment before turning back to Zidane with a frown, “Who is this woman? *Please* don’t tell me you’ve dragged her along to brag about how you’ve gotten a cozy little place to—”

“Please don’t yell at him, Your Majesty!” Simone shouted suddenly, making both Zidane and the Garnet look at her, “Zidane— er, *Mister* Zidane only brought me to the castle so I could speak to my brother, Ber— uh, General Adelbert Steiner! He has done nothing untoward, and has been nothing but a gentleman, in fact! Please don’t be angry with him; I

know that you two are engaged, and I would hate for you two to break up over a misunderstanding!”

There was silence for a moment, and both the queen and Zidane looked at each other... before the woman burst into laughter, “Me, engaged to Zidane? Like I would sully myself with someone so callous!”

“Sorry, we didn’t introduce you,” Zidane agreed amicably, turning to Simone with a smirk. “She may look like Dagger, but she’s really her cousin, Elizabeth.”

“I am Queen Garnet’s lady-in-waiting, and am prepared to do whatever it is that my cousin needs,” Elizabeth continued, glancing at Zidane with a frown. “There is no way I would even consider asking this monkey to carry my ring!”

Simone blinked several times, looking Elizabeth up and down with a slightly agape jaw. “I-I didn’t... I didn’t consider that you could be anything but Her Majesty. Your beauty is such that I was struck dumb for several moments. People say that Queen Garnet is the most beautiful of all of our monarchs, and so I simply assumed you must have been she. I apologize if I offended you, Lady Elizabeth...”

The lady-in-waiting halted for a moment, her eyes narrowing slightly... but she couldn't hide the blush that spread across her cheeks, even when she reached up to cover her face with her long sleeves. "Ah. No, you made no offense, my dear. I was simply surprised; I assumed Zidane had brought you into the castle in order to flaunt his new-found power. If you are truly General Steiner's younger sister, then I will not... deny you the ability to come and go as you please."

Zidane smirked, crossing his arms as he looked between the two girls. "So will you finally accept that maybe I'm here because I care about Dagger and Alexandria, instead of just using people for my evil, nefarious ways?"

"Don't push your luck, monkey-boy," Elizabeth insisted, crossing her arms before turning back to Simone with a smile. "So then, Ms. Steiner, what business do you have with your brother? He has been working here since long before I've come to live in the castle, and I have yet to see you around. What has changed your mind about visiting?"

"Oh, please! Call me Simmie, er— Simone! My name is Simone, but I like Simmie a lot too, so you can call me that, that's all." Elizabeth cocked an

eyebrow, a teasing smile on her face, and Simone shook her head to hide the blush that was now creeping up on *her* face. “Well, Trixie’s been feeling a little sad, and when Zidane came to visit, he suggested I invite Bert out to dinner for a family get together.”

Elizabeth seemed skeptical, and she turned to the genome with a look. “He thought of something like that? Hmm...” Zidane returned her look, waggling his eyebrows with a smile. His point was made, but Elizabeth’s eyeroll showed that she cared little for it, and she returned to Simone instead. “That sounds like a wonderful plan. It’s nice to be able to spend time with family.”

Simone cocked her head as Elizabeth got a far away look in her eye, and the younger Steiner leaned in with an empathetic smile on her face, “...Oh, are you thinking about your family? They probably don’t live in the castle, I bet. Tell you what, after I get my brother home and we have our dinner, then I can invite you over for dinner too!”

Elizabeth halted for a moment, and she slowly turned her head in disbelief, a surprised chuckle escaping her lips. “What are you implying with that?” she asked, the teasing tone still in her voice.

Simone gasped, the blush getting deeper, and she clutched her cheeks in surprise before amending her words. “I mean, we’ll be with Trixie too, of course! Not just the two of us. T-that’d be silly!”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth replied, a warm smile gracing her lips, ‘That sounds like a good plan, Simmie.’ She took a step forward, brushing by Zidane, and smiled at Simone with a warm expression. “Just come on by whenever you want, and you tell me when you’re free. I’ll have to hide my identity, because I look so much like my cousin, but it’d be worth it to spend more time with you.”

Simone stumbled over her words, stammering like a fool as Elizabeth glanced at Zidane before turning back to the younger Steiner. “Oh! Yes. I mean. Of course. I know what you mean. Haha. Well then. I really... should go find Bert. Er— the general. General Steiner.” She edged her way around the hallway before arriving next to the *beaming* Zidane, and she gave a wave at Elizabeth, who watched her with amusement. “I’ll... I’ll see you around, Lady Elizabeth...!”

“Please,” the lady-in-waiting replied with a smile, “Call me Beth.” And she went on her merry way, leaving Simone behind to stare after her. Zidane

stood for a moment before he coughed, making the young woman gasp and turn to the genome, who now waggled his eyebrows at her.

Simone's red face said it all. "Wh-what is that supposed to mean!?" she shouted, loud enough that Zidane could definitely tell who she was related to.

"Nothing, nothing! Come on, let's head to the barracks." The young man crowed before he bounded off, his tail flicking behind him. Simone let out a huff, slapped her cheeks so she had a reason to have a red face, and she followed behind at a brisk pace. Honestly! It was rude to tease a lady; didn't he know that!?

General Adelbert Steiner grumbled to himself as the knight clanked down the hallway with Jasmine at his side. "I want to make sure that everyone knows that this wedding is the *highest* priority! This royal wedding is one of the most uncharacteristic in Alexandria's history; we *must* make sure that there are no unscrupulous types allowed anywhere near the ceremony!" It didn't matter if Zidane preferred for it to be *informal*, he needed to learn how royalty worked, and one couldn't just let *ruffians* close to a

queen who wasn't even royal blood, marrying a commoner from Lindblum, with a *man* standing at her right hand. If he hadn't already lost most of his hair, it'd be getting gray at this point.

"No worries, general. I've been collecting some of the best and brightest under my command..." Steiner looked at Jasmine with a glare, and she rolled her eyes, 'under *our* command, so there will be no problem during the ceremony.' She paused when she looked at Steiner, who huffed loudly and grabbed at his chin to scratch at his five-o'clock shadow. "General, I understand your worry, but if you recall, you are to remain at Queen Garnet's side. Allow me to handle the soldiers; your place is assisting Her Majesty's wedding preparations."

Steiner let out a deep sigh and shook his head, but before he could reply, he heard Zidane shouting around the corner, and he let out a deep sigh. *This* was why he was focusing on what he was *good* at, instead of handling Garnet and Zidane. He could hardly stand babysitting the genome like he had to, but Jasmine was right, technically, and he had a job to do.

"Yoooo, Steiner! Where are you man?" the genome called as Steiner and Jasmine separated, and

the general clanked forward to hail the genome.

“Zidane, what could you *possibly* need with me at this very moment!?” the general shouted, turning a corner to meet his friend, but he halted when he saw the woman at Zidane’s side. ‘S-Simmie!’ He choked, his guilty expression saying it all. “Wh-what brings you here?” he asked just as Zidane gave him a dour expression, and the general caught himself and added, “How’s Bea doing...?”

Simone smiled, cocking her head softly, “She’s fine. A little lonely, but she and the baby are healthy.” She was clutching at her apron, and Adelbert let out a sigh as she shook her head. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be here. I know you’re busy. I just —”

“No, Simmie, no, it’s fine, really—” Adelbert said quickly, and the two spoke over each other for a moment, before they both stopped, and the general took a deep breath before he continued, “I have been... in need of a break anyway. I would love to speak to you.”

“Yo, Simmie, you good here?” Zidane asked suddenly, making the two of them look at the genome. He shrugged lightly before bouncing on the balls of his feet, “I mean, this is a conversation to

have between two siblings, right? I don't want to impose."

"Somehow, I knew this was your doing Zidane; can't stand not having a finger in every pie!" Adelbert huffed, but Simone smiled at the genome, releasing her apron and nodding.

"Thanks for everything, Zidane. I don't think I'd have gotten the courage to do this if it weren't for you. Have a nice day, please!" She reached out and placed a hand on Zidane's arm, and the genome placed his hand on top of it. The small gesture was all that was needed, and she nodded. "I think I'll be fine on my own from here."

"Sure, I'll talk to you later. Yo, 'Bert', I'll see you around too!"

Adelbert let out a resigned *groan* as Zidane pranced off, his tail dancing behind him as he did, and the general turned to his sister. "...You were afraid to visit me?"

"I'm sorry, I just didn't want to bother you, that's it," Simone shrugged, but she looked up at her brother with a weak smile, "And you're a *general* now too. I couldn't just ask you to take time out of your busy life for me."

Adelbert let out a hiss and clanked as he turned away, his frown apparent. It was true that he was busy, but he hated the fact that his own family thought that he couldn't spend time with them. Whether or not it was true, the mere feeling was too much for him to bear. "I shouldn't have... I'm sorry, Simmie. I hadn't even considered the reason why you never visited. I simply thought you were as busy as I was."

"And I was!" Simone said, chuckling at the thought, "I didn't want to get rid of our family's legacy, but I'm not nearly as good a merchant as Father was. Just like you, too, I suppose."

Adelbert grumbled, but not unkindly. "Aye, that's true. I can hardly believe you spent so much effort on it; you never were one for numbers."

"...But becoming a homemaker or a servant to the nobility wouldn't do for a *woman*; I needed something that a fine, upstanding lady could do." The two chuckled a bit at the thought, but eventually she shook her head. "But that's not why I'm here. I think you know why, however: Trixie and I are so bored, we wanted to invite you for dinner. I know you might be busy tonight, but do you have a day you can get off?"

Adelbert turned back to his sister, his frown apparent... but it soon switched to one of thoughtfulness, and he considered what Jasmine had said. She told him that she had things under control, and she had been a good second-in-command so far. Perhaps it *was* best if he trusted in her.

...His mind was made up, and the general let out a sigh that felt oddly relieved. “You know what, Simmie? I’ll take you up on that offer. I have left most of my work with my lieutenant, so I am free today, if you wish to have me tonight.” Simone’s head shot up with a dropped jaw, but her eyes began to shine brightly when Adelbert gave her a rare smile, “Sometimes, getting promoted actually *frees up* your time, it seems.”

Simone practically danced in place, hopping with joy as she clapped. “Oh Bert! I’m so happy! Can I hug you, can I!?”

“Oh, well, I’m not exactly clean right now, I was training some of my soldiers, so—” but Simone jumped up and wrapped her arms around her brother anyway, squeezing him tight and letting out a giggle. Adelbert coughed from the sudden contact, but he wrapped an arm around his sister to hold her steady,

and he rolled his eyes with a smile. Some things never changed...

The Steiner household was abuzz when Simone came home and nearly collided with Beatrix, taking her hands and excitedly explaining when her brother mentioned he'd be ready. The two immediately set to preparing dinner and making things ready for their "grand general's" visit. Simone looked like a Bandersnatch on sugar, bounding around the area with a giggle as Beatrix worked meticulously to make things perfect. She had to rest a few times, (all the excitement seemed to reach the child, who kicked several times in succession) but soon the two had the place cleaned and a dinner prepared just in time for the knock on the door.

Beatrix was up quicker than even she expected, given her state, but Simone was there to take her shoulder and shake her head. "Oh no, no Trixie, I'll go get him! You stay here!" And she zoomed off after Beatrix nodded lightly.

Heavens, she had *butterflies* in her stomach. It had been so long since she had spent time with Bert, she was feeling a little giddy despite herself. She

blamed it on the hormones; she wouldn't be *nearly* as silly as this if she wasn't pregnant!

...and yet she wasn't angry about it either. She had an excuse, but she enjoyed the feeling of knowing that her lover would be here soon, and that thought set her heart alight in such a wonderful way.

She heard Simone squeal in delight, as well as Bert's dignified rumbling voice, and Beatrix fluffed out her matron's robe and tried to stand up in a dignified manner. She hardly assumed it *was* very dignified, given her state, but she doubted that her lover would mind much.

The time spent listening to the two of them climb the stairs to the living area and kitchen was agonizing, and Beatrix watched as Adelbert came into view. He was dressed casually, like a civilian, and Beatrix realized that this was one of the first times she actually saw him as such. Usually it was either in his armor, or out of it. The two of them hardly ever were able to spend time outside of work, and now...

Adelbert's dropped jaw wasn't a rare sight on him, but this time it was perfectly understandable; he hadn't seen her like this much either, much less so full of their child. The thought of how she must

actually look, with her belly so huge, made her cheeks burn despite themselves, and she called out to him. “Well!? Say something!”

Adelbert started and shook his head. “No, I mean, I didn’t— Bea, you look amazing, and so healthy! Not a day went by that I didn’t worry for you. Have you been receiving my letters?”

“Of course we have, haven’t you spoken to your sister about them?” Beatrix said as the Steiners filed into the kitchen and Adelbert wrapped his arms securely around her. “...But I don’t want to talk about that. Oh Bert, I missed you so much, and I... I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I think I understand too. I missed you as well, my beloved. You and our child.” He looked down at the swollen belly, as if that just came to mind, and he glanced back at his lover. “May I...?”

“Of all the people who *shouldn’t* have to ask, it’s you...” Beatrix said amiably, a smile on her lips and a tear in her eye.

...Dinner had to wait for nearly an hour, as Adelbert became so overcome at the very idea of a child to hold that he began to sob the moment he felt

the baby kick, and that sent Beatrix into her own tears, and the two finally were able to spend some time together, as a family might.

21. Auntie Abigail and Cousin Conrad

Queen Garnet took a deep breath and admired herself in the mirror. She was so beautiful, she knew, but when she cocked her head to get a better look, she got pushed a bit by the woman behind her. “Your Majesty, *please*, I am trying to fix your hair,” Elizabeth said jovially as she finished tying up the royal’s hair into a high-do.

“Sorry, I just can’t help it, you do such good work on it, Beth.” The small smile from Elizabeth wasn’t lost on Garnet, and she made sure to be as still as possible for her cousin as she worked. When Elizabeth was finished, the queen smiled at her reflection in the mirror before glancing through the reflection at Elizabeth’s beaming face. “What has gotten into you, Beth? You’re usually so dour. Has something happened?”

“Hmm?” Elizabeth asked, blinking out of her thoughts and looking at Garnet through the mirror, “Oh, no, that’s not. I didn’t mean...” she paused when she saw her cousin’s leer, and Elizabeth’s blush rose. “I was... thinking about how things had

been improving around the city, as well as the castle. It's... so inspiring. Your strength of will and leadership skills are exemplary."

"Oh please, you flatter me," Garnet replied as she stood, 'I couldn't have done this on my own, not without you, nor Steiner or Zidane.' Garnet fully expected her cousin to make a face, but for the first time, Elizabeth simply shrugged, which made the queen cock an eyebrow. "You've changed yourself. This is the first time you didn't gag when I mentioned Zidane. What *happened* with the two of you recently?"

Elizabeth's blush didn't leave, and she shook her head. "I was just... thinking of a new friend of mine. Zidane... well, he brought her into the castle to speak with her brother, General Steiner."

"Your new friend is Steiner's sister!?" Garnet cried, her eyes shining. Elizabeth's shout was priceless, and her blush brightened further.

"Your Majesty, please keep this to yourself!" the lady-in-waiting whined as Garnet clutched her cheeks and giggled, twirling around a moment before sailing from the room. 'This is *quite* embarrassing; you know I'm not the type of woman to sound like a giggling waif!' Elizabeth jogged after

the queen past Kathy, who stared after the two with a confused blink. “Your Majesty, please!”

“There’s nothing wrong with sounding like a giggling waif every once in a while. I’ve learned that long ago.” Garnet slowed her walk to save her hair-do, and she smiled at her cousin when Elizabeth caught up. “But I promise I won’t say anything to anyone if you don’t want me to. You’re my best friend, and I wouldn’t want anything to come between us at all—”

...Queen Garnet halted when she saw a few familiar figures walk into the castle as if they owned it, and the royal’s eyes widened ever so slightly. “O-oh... H-hello, Auntie...”

Elizabeth’s mother, Princess Abigail, Countess of Treno, and her son, Conrad, waltzed into the castle with an air that only royals could master. At their heels was her guardian and gofer, Victor, who carried a bag at each side. Garnet fought to keep her jaw from dropping, the queen’s aunt looked at the young woman with a sly smile. “Why, Garnet, my darling niece. How *have* you been doing today?”

Garnet looked at Elizabeth, who was beginning to sweat with fear, but the queen assumed that her cousin had no idea what was going on either.

Instead, the royal woman turned back to her aunt and curtsied deeply before standing up to her full height and responding: “I have been well, Auntie. My apologies, you and Conrad have me at a disadvantage. The wedding isn’t until two more weeks; is there a reason you’ve arrived early?”

Abigail giggled lightly, covering her mouth with her hand the way her sister Brahne used to cover her face with her fan. “Oh, dear, you’re still new to the throne, and I know how difficult it can be preparing a wedding while also running a kingdom.” Garnet pursed her lips; Abigail didn’t know how difficult it was because she *never* ran a kingdom, and her aunt continued smoothly, a smile on her face, “Therefore I would come to assist you in any way possible. You may leave the planning to me, and if you need any assistance, you can be assured that your dear auntie will do whatever she can to help you.”

Oh, that was rich. Garnet already had an advisor in Doctor Tot, and there was nothing that “Auntie Abigail” could do about that. “Oh, Auntie, I would hate to pull you away from Treno, what with the power vacuum left with King’s... *disappearance*. You have too much on your plate, running your city while I run *my* kingdom.”

“Of *course*, my dear, but it really isn’t *your* kingdom, isn’t it?” Abigail asked, her lips curling up into a smile. “You’re not your mother’s real daughter, after all.”

Garnet’s eyes narrowed at the treasonous words, and her aunt smirked at her in reply. Elizabeth and Conrad looked at each other, unsure of what to do...

...Until a young monkey-boy popped up next to them, eliciting a scream from the countess’s son. “So who’s the newcomer?” Zidane asked as he slid up next to Garnet. The queen was about to speak, but her fiancé had already gotten a good look at Elizabeth and let out a crow: “Oh. Oh. *Oh*, You’re Beth’s mom! You got the same chin!”

“My name is *Elizabeth!*” the lady-in-waiting hissed under her breath as Abigail turned to blink at Zidane with an offended gawk.

“No manners? Wanders the castle unchecked? You must be Zidane Tribal, my dear niece’s fiancé.” She looked the young man up and down before cocking an eyebrow. “I’d offer you my hand, but I wouldn’t want a disease.”

Zidane shrugged lightly before waggling his eyebrows back at her. “I’ve rubbed elbows with

enough of the people here that everyone else in the castle has already caught everything I might have had.” Garnet coughed loudly and glared at Zidane. He felt her glare burning a hole in the back of his head, and he cocked his head to look at her apologetically. He gave her a sweeping, actor’s bow, before backing up and deferring to the one in charge. “Sorry, sorry, let’s not imply that everyone in the castle has caught some horrid disease.”

“Indeed, next time, let *me* handle the affairs of court, yes?” Garnet insisted, and the genome raised his hands in surrender.

“Of course, Dagger, because of all the people I defer to in this kingdom, it’s her *queen*.” He gave the countess a look, which she returned with a sneer, and he flashed a wave before he bounded up the foyer. “If you need me, Dagger, I’m gunna go find Steiner. I think I’ve found a replacement for Pluto Knight IX!”

“Thank you, dear; I’m a little busy now!” she called back as Zidane flounced off, and the queen squared her shoulders so she could look at her aunt a little fiercer. “Well then, shall I have Elizabeth take you three to your guest rooms?”

Abigail's disgusted look returned to a smirk. "Of course, Your Majesty. We are ever so tired after our journey. We would love to take some time to rest. I just hope the guest rooms look better than the sty that is the courtyard. Have you done anything to repair the castle, my dear?"

Garnet's lip twitched almost imperceptibly, but she mentally berated herself for not keeping herself perfectly in check. "Of course, Auntie. There is just so much work to be done; I apologize, your room may not be up to par as your own guest rooms back in Treno." Which, she didn't add, were completely spared the horrors of Brahne and Kuja releasing the Eidolons on the world.

The countess didn't seem to think that was a good enough reason. "That's why I came, my dear, to help make sure you did your job that much *better*."

Garnet glanced at Elizabeth before waving her hand. "Beth, may you take them to the rooms? I'd call for a servant, but you know the castle well enough, and we need them taken care of as soon as possible." Or else Abigail would start screeching. Elizabeth nodded and Garnet smiled. "Thank you so much, and I'm sure you and Conrad have a lot of catching up to do."

Elizabeth whirled to look at her brother, whom she noticed hadn't said a word the entire time. She looked back up at Garnet, but the queen had already moved up the stairs, passed under the painting of her mother, and was gone, off to continue her work. The young lady-in-waiting bowed to her mother and gave her the best smile she could muster. "Ah, yes... right this way, Mother."

Abigail smirked at her daughter, whose face was still a little worried. "Don't let it get to you, darling," the duchess said with a quiet smirk. "You know how people born with *common blood* can get, after all." She snapped her fingers, and Conrad and Victor were right behind her, completely silent, as they should be.

...Elizabeth suddenly felt like she was five years old again.

The queen's cousin didn't speak much as she walked the three up to the guest rooms, the larger of which she offered to her mother. "This is our finest room, Mother. I pray you find it to your liking."

Countess Abigail looked into the room, her nose turned up at the draft in the room. "Is there a *hole* in

the wall?”

“One of Bahamut’s flares blasted apart the stone right over there,” Elizabeth explained immediately, causing Abigail to glance back at her daughter with a stoic expression. The lady-in-waiting gestured to the patched wall with an apologetic look, “The workers have done what they could to make sure there would be no problems in the wind and rain, but I am afraid that we’ve been unable to finish repairing it completely, as we’re focusing more on the city than the castle itself.”

Abigail frowned deeply, but didn’t say anything beyond it. “Victor, you’re with me. Elizabeth, take Conrad to *his* room, if you please.”

“Of course, Mother,” Elizabeth replied, bowing low before turning to her brother. Conrad nodded, and the two left their mother and Victor before walking down the hallway towards another room, which Elizabeth specifically chose to be a little further from their mother’s room than necessary.

The moment they walked inside, the young woman slammed the door shut, whirled to face her brother, and pointed an accusing finger at him. “Okay, talk. You’re not mute like Victor; what’s going on? Why are you here?” Garnet and she were

having a wonderful time, and she finally found someone... someone she really *liked*, and now her mother had to come and *ruin* it. “If Mother *really* was hoping to wrest control from Her Majesty for whatever reason, she would have attempted to do so far sooner than this.”

Conrad looked at Elizabeth’s furious glare, completely unfazed by his sister’s intimidation tactics. “I couldn’t speak with Mother around,” the young man said, “I’m not sure I should even be speaking now; even the walls have ears, Beth.”

“Ugh, this isn’t Treno!” Elizabeth insisted, beginning to pace as the young man crossed his arms and watched her fume, “The people of the castle are loyal to Garnet, not Mother!”

“Says you,” Conrad replied, making Elizabeth stop and turn to him. ‘After you stopped sending letters telling us about the goings-on in the castle, Mother started sneaking in a few new recruits that have been doing what you’ve failed to do the past year. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.’ Elizabeth blinked owlishly at her brother, and he turned towards the window, uninterested. “You really did let yourself go. Mother would have been furious if you let your guard down like this back home.”

“And you believed her?” Elizabeth asked, cocking an eyebrow. Conrad mirrored the expression before she elaborated. “You don’t think General Beatrix would have caught any spies trading information out of the castle? Now that Steiner and Jasmine are running things, especially since Gina was banished, they’ve cracked down even further. Obviously Mother would have lied to you about the power she wields, though. She always wanted us under her thumb.”

Conrad shut his mouth, thinking to himself whether or not his sister was telling the truth or not. Elizabeth couldn’t blame him; he was always the type of person to be kept out of the loop. Why bother explaining things to him when he, as a *man*, wouldn’t even be sullying his hands in politics?

Eventually, he crossed his arms and went quiet again, which Elizabeth didn’t really blame him for. She shook her head and tapped her foot, trying to figure out everything on her own. She began piecing things together as she paced about the room: “Okay, Mother wouldn’t have come to Alexandria so early before the wedding unless she felt there was something to gain from it....But nothing has really changed except for...” She paused before turning to

her brother. "...The wedding itself. She's angry because Queen Garnet is getting married!"

There had been so many dukes and counts from Treno asking for the queen's hand, but everyone had known that Garnet denied them all; it pained Elizabeth to see her cousin crying over her lost love, but now that she had begun to get to know Zidane personally, she now knew why Garnet had held on for his return, and she knew why her own mother would be against the marriage. Garnet was common born, and so was Zidane. If they were to marry, it would mean the royal family of Alexandria would be destroyed, cut off at the head, and a nobody foreign family from across the sea, and worse, from another *planet*, would rule instead.

"But that doesn't make sense," Elizabeth said as Conrad chewed on the inside of his mouth, "Mother can't be *that* angry about the whole thing; the Alexandrians were the ones that chose their queen, overall. What could she possibly do? She can't dethrone Her Majesty without serious repercussions....Besides, there aren't any people related to the former Queen Brahne, Alexander Bring Her Peace. Who would she—" She paused before looking up at her brother, and Conrad stood up straight, keeping his lip bitten to avoid speaking

up, and Elizabeth pointed at him with a sickened expression. “You... You’re Queen Brahne’s nephew. She wants to marry *you* to Her Majesty!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Conrad said in a tone that Elizabeth could only tell was right on the money. “Besides, she’s not our actual cousin. Why does it sicken you so? Is it because you want her for yourself?”

Elizabeth bristled, her blood running cold. Her first instinct was to bite back, and she turned red with fury as she shouted, “How... How *dare* you even imply...!”

“Please, don’t even. I saw the way you looked at her ever since you hit puberty. The entire family has known for *years*. Why do you think Mother sent you here?” Conrad asked with a scoff, his frown creasing as his sister opened her mouth like a gaping fish. “To protect the queen? When she hasn’t the blood to rule? No, Queen Garnet was never in danger of assassins; she commands the gods themselves! You were supposed to *seduce* her, create a big enough scandal that Mother could regain power. And don’t give me that disgusted face, that’s what you’ve wanted all along, if your blushing glances in her direction were anything to go by. If you actually

went ahead with it, you could have had everything you ever wanted. You two could have run off together somewhere and lived your lives in peace! But no, you couldn't even be a *homosexual* well enough, and now Mother is going to make me-!"

Conrad halted, catching himself at the last minute. His sister gawked at his outburst, her mouth moving but her tongue not able to form the words. Conrad shook his head and turned to collect his bag and begin unpacking. "It matters not. We are here due to Mother's wishes, as it was before, and as it will always be as long as she wishes it."

"No... no, Conrad, that's..." Elizabeth watched as her brother fussed with his bag, his fingers trembling and his lip threatening to spill blood. The lady-in-waiting shook her head, thinking of what they could do. There had to be something. *Something!* Who in the world could find a way to stop this madness without ruining the whole wedding...? "...Wait here. Conrad, wait here, I'll go... I need to find someone."

The young man looked up, but Elizabeth was already gone.

Adelbert Steiner grumbled under his breath as Zidane balanced on one leg of his chair. “You do realize that Pluto Knight I is the captain now. You need to tell *him* about this Ryan person. I’m *busy*, you see.”

“Yeah well, you need to lighten up a bit and hang out with your subordinates. You know, be a people’s general!” Zidane snapped backed down on the chair and hopped up. “Think back on it. Ryan. Cool dude. I’ll go talk to Blutzen about it, but if he talks to you, now you know that Ryan is a good knight who wants to be the best there is—”

“Once again, Zidane, a little *busy* here!” Jasmine called as she strode into the room with a packet under her arm. She shooed the genome out of the room before turning to the general, “the order of knights for the wedding, general.”

Steiner snorted in thanks as he took the packet and began reading them off... “Why is Nina in the west wing? You *know* she has been harassing Mullenkedheim!”

“That’s because he *needs* to be harassed or he’ll eat all of the food for the wedding before Her Majesty can even get to the dinner!”

“Quina has always been a wonderful deterrent. The point is that Nina has treated the Pluto Knights as her personal punching bags; the women have a *job* to do, that *isn’t* focusing on fools!”

“Well maybe if the Pluto Knights *weren’t foolish* then the guards wouldn’t have to *focus on them!*”

Zidane let out a “woof” as he jogged out of the room. They worked together well and were a good team, but one would be forgiven if they thought that the military personnel were ready to tear at each others’ throats. *Let’s just hope they don’t actually murder the crap out of each other later.*

The genome swished his tail as he approached the throne room, but this time he knocked on the door before he opened it. Didn’t want a repeat of that time she snapped at him before recognizing who it was. Thankfully, she wasn’t in such a hot mood as last time, although things seemed to be heating up, given how tense everyone seemed. Garnet was still with Tot, speaking to him over the table, and Elizabeth was at her side, fidgeting so much that Zidane was sure she was trying to keep her emotions in check. “Is everything okay?” the young man asked.

“Zidane!” Elizabeth said, turning to him and stepping forward so quickly she nearly caught herself on her dress, ‘You need to talk to Conrad.’ Zidane cocked an eyebrow, and Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “My *brother*. He’s being forced into something he doesn’t want and Mother’s trying to ruin the wedding!”

“Beth, please,” Garnet insisted, turning to glance at her cousin, “What are you talking about? How can Auntie Abigail ruin anything? She barely does anything in Treno; how can she suddenly have the power to stop anything here?”

“I don’t... I don’t *know* just yet, okay?” Elizabeth admitted, hugging her arms and fidgeting some more, “but Conrad implied that Mother brought him here so that he could marry *you* and the royal family’s bloodline would remain pure, or whatever. *Please*, we can’t let this happen!”

Garnet shook her head, completely bemused. “He *implied* it? I’m supposed to kick my aunt out of the castle and create a scandal over an implication? Beth, I understand that this isn’t an ordinary visit, but you can’t just—”

“So that’s why I wanted to talk to Zidane.” Elizabeth turned back to Zidane, whose eyebrows

raised with a smile; he wasn't used to the lady-in-waiting looking to him rather than Garnet, so he crossed his arms and gestured for her to continue. "There's something you do, some magical... *thing* that you can do to make people... *listen* to you. Well, I need you to do that to Conrad. Use that thing now, please, and make Conrad not want to listen to Mother. If Mother doesn't have her little underlings, she can't force the issue."

Oh, he got where Elizabeth was going with this. "So we don't have to kick 'Auntie Abigail' out of the castle on a hunch, but any plot she *might* have will be foiled because her playing pieces won't 'play' nice." Zidane crossed his arms, his tail swishing back and forth. 'Hmmm, Steiner *does* want me out of the castle too (been bothering him too much, which is hilarious given all the times I apparently *haven't* been bothering him too much), and this'll give me a reason to wander around the city. You're saying the plan is to marry him to Dagger, then? So I have to make him *not* want to marry her.' He glanced at Garnet, who gave him a confused look, like *Why are you even contemplating this?* Before turning back to Elizabeth and shrugging. "Easier said than done, Dagger's a *fox* and no one in their right mind wouldn't want to."

Elizabeth began sweating nervously at that line, which made Zidane cock an eyebrow, but she shook her head and pointed at him firmly. “Please, I’m only doing this because I don’t want Mother to start moving in and ruining everything. I told you I’d do anything to keep Her Majesty happy, and I hope you will too.”

“Sure, once again, can’t lose much by just taking the guy out on a date around the city.” Everyone’s eyes whipped up to look at Zidane, who shrugged and elaborated, “Sorry, a *play* date.”

Elizabeth groaned and tore at her eyelids as Zidane swished from the room, his next destination in mind.

Conrad looked around his room after setting his clothing to rights, and he frowned at how drab the place looked. He remembered coming to Alexandria to visit family, and playing with his uncle and aunt before everything changed. He remembered King, vaguely, and it was interesting to him that the man was, well, a *man* . A real, flesh and blood person, rather than a statue on a pedestal that people whispered about in reverent awe. It was a shame that

he disappeared; no one was sure what to do with his estate. Mother wanted to give it to Elizabeth, but she refused, since she was still in Alexandria at the time. No one wanted Mother to take both *her* title and King's, so she had to find some other minor lady to take over. Not that he knew *who* it was; he was, after all, too busy with his study of the violin and the fine Alexandrian art of embroidery. He remembered asking if he could visit Bishop's shop and learn a bit about potion-making and pharmacy, but he was immediately denied. Young lordlings simply *didn't* do such trifling things. That was for his servants to do!

Conrad turned to the window and moved to lean against it, gazing out over the moat and consider where his life was going to go from here. It was hardly a question what his mother wanted him to do; Elizabeth wasn't an idiot, and she was the one who was taught political intrigue, being the daughter of a duchess. He considered what life would be like as prince consort of Alexandria. Sure, marrying the woman that he knew growing up as his cousin wasn't ideal. No, it was downright creepy, and if he were a praying man, he'd pray to Alexander for his mother's soul. And yet, he knew Garnet to be a good

woman, and there were worse people he could marry.

He sighed. There was no point in worrying about it now. Whatever his mother had planned for him wasn't anything he needed to think about, in fact—

“Hey there!” Conrad let out a very unmanly squeal when a young man dropped down in front of his face, and he scrambled away from the window with a gasp as the betailed man dropped onto the sill. “What was it, Conrad? Beth told me. Name’s Zidane. Nice to meet you.”

“Where did you come from!?” Conrad cried, moving to look out the window and check how he got to the window from the roof, but he halted himself when he realized that Zidane was far too close for comfort. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, I was just inspecting the roof. We’ve still been fixing things up, but the town itself is looking better, so we can start fixing the castle itself now.” Zidane grabbed at the rim of the sill and leaned back precariously so he could look up at the top of the castle. “I’m the best at balancing myself, so I took it upon myself to check things out. As to what I’m doing *here*, I *could* say that I saw you sticking your head out the window and I wanted to say ‘hi’, but

I'm not in the habit of lying. Your sister asked me to talk to you, so..." He gestured to himself. "Here I am!"

Conrad stared at Zidane, and he glanced at the door, his mind racing. Should he run? This was Her Majesty's *fiance*, what if he was here to...

He gulped audibly and flexed his fingers. "N-nice... to meet you..." he said softly, staring at the smile on his... "rival's"? face.

There was silence for a moment, the two staring at each other in what seemed like a standoff. What Conrad wouldn't give to be able to read this monkey's mind...!

"Well!" Zidane said, leaning back into the room and clapping his hands together, "I did say I had come to talk to you, so you don't have to talk, right. No worries about that. But here's something that's *also* the truth; I don't want you to have to be alone during this whole..." he gestured to nothing in particular, pretending there was a giant bandersnatch in the room, "*thing*, so why don't we go out on the town in a few hours?"

Conrad let out a worried squeal despite himself, and he reached up to bite at his knuckle to keep

himself in check. “I-I don’t think that would be very appropriate. Mother needs me here, after all.” And he was afraid that he was going to get murdered for trying to edge in between Garnet and her fiancé.

Zidane raised his hands in surrender and hopped up onto the sill, eliciting another squeal from Conrad, although it was more in worry for the monkey man. “No, no, I understand. Look though, if you’re planning on staying in Alexandria longer than usual, you should get to know its people. Doctor Tot told me this wonderful little saying: ‘The Queen may be the Law of Alexandria, but it is her Prince Consort that is its Heart’.”

Conrad’s blood ran cold. How could someone from another country, hell, another *planet* know about Alexandrian sayings with such certainty?...It was absolutely insane....but it also showed just how much he loved the country, that he was willing to learn. “Y-yeah, I know that saying. Uncle Nathan was the epitome of that saying; but uhm... I don’t know if we should be out alone, that’s all.”

“Oh, right. Alexandrian noblemen shouldn’t be out without a chaperon, got it.” Zidane hung on the edge of the window and crossed his leg over his other. “Oh! Well, I got a friend. Adelbert Steiner,

General of the Alexandrian army? I know he's busy, but there's this *thing* I need to do with him. Gunna grab his sister on the way too. Why don't we all go together tomorrow, just the four of us? Your mom can't say 'no' to being watched by the greatest knight in all of Alexandria, can she?"

Well, she *could*, yes, especially given the fact that he was a *man*, but... but... Conrad remembered Adelbert Steiner, back when he was a lowly captain of the Pluto Knights. He had only joined a few years before Conrad's last visit to Alexandria Castle. From what he remembered of Captain Steiner, the man was a very good knight. He would rather *die* than let a member of the royal family be harmed....And a good Prince Consort *did* need to learn about the people of his city, rather than live high above the peasants below. "Y-you know what, Mister Zidane? You're not... half bad. Perhaps you're right. I-I think I *should* spend a moment or so in the town."

The genome smiled and flicked his wrist with a flippant yet genial wave. "Sounds like a plan. I'll come by, *at the door next time*, around 9 am tomorrow, with General Steiner and Simmie. I'd call it a boy's day out, but well..." he chuckled and gestured to the door, as if Simone would walk right through it. "Men and women really should be able to

have a fun time together without there being rumors, you know?”

Conrad crossed his arms and spoke up despite himself; “Given the rumors I’ve heard of you, Mister Zidane, you can bet that if there *were* rumors, they’d all be about *you*.”

Zidane laughed heartily and happily enough that Conrad’s icy demeanor cracked. “You got me! But I mean, when you’re getting married to a woman as damn beautiful as Dagger, then other girls just really don’t do it, you know?”...Conrad blanched, and Zidane’s eyes widened. “Oh dude, sorry, forgot she was your cousin; I doubt you want me talking about her that way.”

“That’s not the problem, I just—”

“Then no harm, no foul. Anyway, I gotta keep working on the roof. Tomorrow, about 9 am! Remember!” And Zidane retreated up the window and onto the roof.

“Mister Zidane!” Conrad cried, rushing to the window and looking upwards, “Be careful!”

“Oh, I’m fine!” The monkey man called back down. “Besides, Just Zidane’ll do! It’s easier that way, you know?”

“Mi— Zidane!” But Zidane had already hopped up over a parapet and down the other side, disappearing from sight, and Garnet’s cousin slipped back into his room and considered what just happened. It was all so fast, he didn’t even remember what had happened....But he did remember one thing.

Tomorrow, 9 am.

...Ohhhh, his mother wouldn’t like this...

22. Boy's Day Out

Simone and Beatrix spent most of the morning prepping to make sure Beatrix didn't have to cook while Simone was out, and they made small talk around breakfast as they waited for Zidane. "So, you're going out with Bert and Zidane? Shopping, right?" Beatrix asked.

"I don't know how Zidane got Bert to agree to taking another day off, but it seems like we're going to be helping Beth's brother around the town?"

Ah, that would do it. Steiner was supposed to protect the royal family, and Conrad applied. Beatrix took a drink from her glass and considered when she last saw the boy. "Speaking of Lady Elizabeth, I'm sorry you two couldn't have dinner alone together. I should have taken a walk instead; I felt like a third wheel."

"Oh!" Simone shook her head, biting her lip and smiling dumbly at the memory. 'No, no, it's great. I'm happy you were there. I would have been a *mess* if there wasn't someone else here. Besides.' She shyly slurped at her soup and giggled. "We went out to take a walk together afterwards. It was a great

time anyway; thanks for the fashion tips though! I think... I think she liked the slit up my skirt..." She giggled madly and clutched her red cheeks. "I knew I was right to ask you. You have so many female admirers!"

...Beatrix blinked in confusion. "I have what?"

Simone's head shot up. "You didn't notice!?" She cried almost incredulously. "You're so popular with the women, both in and out of the army; I knew if I asked you, I was sure to be noticed too!"

Beatrix placed a hand over her mouth and shook her head with a smile. "Huh. You think you know a town. I guess that's another reason I shouldn't be advertising where I live now."

Simone shrugged, her own smile a little impish. "I mean, I wouldn't have minded before, having lots of ladies come to visit, but with this thing with Beth..." Simone bit her lip and giggled again. "I think I'm good now." Beatrix didn't think she needed to add much to that happy smile, and so the two fell into an easy silence afterwards, moving instead to finish their breakfast.

When Zidane arrived, the two of them already finished washing the dishes and were waiting for

him in the front room. He was dressed a little fashionably compared to his usual attire, perhaps on account of Elizabeth or Garnet's goading, and even Beatrix was a little surprised at the way the genome strode about like a preening bird. "Yo, Simmie, Beatrix! You two are looking great as usual!" the genome called as he shuffled over to check the shelves full of foodstuffs. Simone sidled up next to him to give him a hug, and Zidane happily returned it with a chuckle. 'Yeah, I feel like we're practically family too, Simmie. Yo, Beatrix.' The pariah looked up as Zidane addressed her. "Thanks for letting me drag Simmie along. It'll be better if we have a few more people along than just Steiner and me. You know."

Beatrix shook her head, looking stoic but not annoyed. "Don't worry about me," she replied, "Simmie needs some time outside anyway, and I'm far enough along that I shouldn't be going out much anyway. Just say 'hi' to Bert for me, will you?"

"Definitely, but I'll try to see if we can pass by when we drop Simmie off back here, and you can tell him for yourself." Beatrix replied with a small smile, and she looked at Simone before nodding.

“Thanks so much for this, Trixie!” Simone called, and she took Zidane’s hand before dragging him out the door. The genome shrugged at Beatrix as she gave him a final wave goodbye.

...The baby kicked, and she sighed. Well, only a few more weeks of this, and then...

Zidane and Simone caught up about the going on around the castle as they wandered through the streets and headed to the boats. “So wait, you haven’t told Bert yet!?” she cried out in horror. “I don’t want to tell him that he has to do it! He’ll be so angry!”

“He’ll be angry at *me*, but that’s his natural state anyway, so that’s not a huge deal,” Zidane replied, flippantly as usual, and he hopped off the boat before offering her a hand. When Simone was on dry land, he skipped off with her on his heels. “Besides, that’s a general’s job anyway, isn’t it? To protect the Alexandrian royal family. And whether or not he lives here, Conrad *is* Queen Garnet’s cousin. Might as well ask him to come along and help Conrad see a bit of the city.”

Simone hadn't thought of it that way, but it made sense, she supposed. She just didn't want to go in and have her brother yelling at everyone again.... She knew that their family had a bit of a short fuse, but they also knew how to keep each other from getting mad at the other. Ever since their mother was killed in the war, they knew they had to keep themselves together, not that she remembered much of a time before it. She was still a baby when the Burmecians attacked... when their mother was killed....Who would have thought that a single father, husband to a second daughter of a minor noble, would help raise the two to such heights? It was almost incredible to think that her brother was the second most powerful man in Alexandria....She just wished that he didn't seem so angry whenever she saw him in the castle...

Simone was thoughtful all through the castle and into the barracks, although she had a passing thought that she wished they passed by Elizabeth on the way. Apparently she had to take care of her mother and was in a different wing at the time. Unfortunate, because she would have given Simone the courage to stride through the castle the way Zidane was able to. Ugh, here she was, only knowing Elizabeth for a month, and now suddenly she could hardly do

anything without her. Bert would chastise her for being so dependent on other people...

Speaking of Bert, they found him speaking to Pluto Knight VI, back on active duty after saving Beatrix's life, essentially. Breireicht was going for his morning jog, and Steiner was ensuring that at least he could assess anything that needed fixing when he was at the top of the tower. "That's the general for you!" Breireicht said with a smile as Steiner handed off a checklist for him to peruse, "Always making sure that we're working hard, even when we're taking a break!"

"You're really not supposed to be taking a break, you just arrived!" Steiner insisted with a grumble, "Jasmine will send her underlings to harass you if you don't do your work when you're *supposed* to."

"You're worrying about me too? I knew there was a reason Her Majesty chose you!" Breireicht crooned just as Zidane arrived. "Ah! And here's Zidane as well. Nice to have you join us with your lady friend!"

Steiner whirled around, his face a bright shade of red the moment he saw his sister. "Simmie!? What are you doing here?"

Simone gestured to Zidane with a sheepish smile. “Zidane invited me. We’re going to go shopping with Prince Conrad, and we were wondering if you wanted to come along?”

“Going... *shopping* with Prince Conrad!?” Steiner shouted incredulously, facing Zidane with a growl. “What have you gotten my sister into this time!?”

Zidane raised his hands in surrender as Simone took a step back and tried to find something else to look at. “Absolutely nothing! You know how stuffy nobles can be; you know damn well that Conrad will sit in his room and do nothing for the few weeks leading up to the wedding, so let’s help him feel a little at home. Besides, we need to go shopping for *you* anyway.”

Steiner’s usual frown creased into a deep canyon as Breireicht waved and was off to the tower. “I swear to all the gods above and below, if you make another ‘Rusty’ joke...”

“Do I look like that much of a boring guy that I can’t come up with a few new jibes for my friends?” Zidane asked, to which Steiner replied with a gauntleted palm to the face, ‘It’s jewelry, anyway. Can’t be a great general if you and yours don’t look

the part.’ Zidane turned on his heel and was off. “Now come on, I said I’d be at Conrad’s room at nine, and we’re going to be late if you two keep lollygagging.”

Steiner stared after Zidane as the genome flounced off, and he turned to his sister. “...Do you have any idea what he’s talking about?”

Even Simone crossed her arms and knit her eyebrows in thought. “...You’d think Zidane wouldn’t worry so much about how he or his friends looked...”

Conrad stared at his cufflinks and looked at the small mirror in his guest room. He wasn’t sure why he woke up and got ready, but something told him that things would turn out okay. He heard about Zidane; he was one of the people who saved the world. He was the one who knew King on a personal level, which meant that Zidane was the closest and final link he had to knowing more about the Grand Lord. He was one of the few men who possessed the same power as the greatest lords of Treno, and therefore he was something of a model for Conrad to look up to. He was a man who didn’t let anyone rule

over him; a man who could stand alongside a woman and be truly free.

...He knew he could never have that same amount of freedom that King had, but seeing Zidane, a man and Queen Garnet's fiancé, clambering all over the castle... Conrad was reminded of King's freedom, and it made him wish he could spread his wings as well, just as King did before he disappeared.

...Conrad wasn't so foolish as to believe that King truly *had* disappeared, however. Everyone knew the Iifa Tree had gone crazy, that the dragons that spewed from the portal were like the one that King owned, and when the warriors returned from the land they called Memoria, they spoke of a world and existence twixt this one and the Great Beyond... and so deep down Conrad knew that his role model was the one who tried to destroy all of creation. Was freedom truly so horrible that to desire his own choices in life would bring about unbridled destruction? Perhaps it *was* better to play it safe, so that no one would be hurt. If he married Garnet and the two of them continued the royal lineage as his mother wished, then there would be no need to worry about people wanting a true noble on the throne, and his sister would be safe from assassins.

The knock on the door startled the young man from his thoughts, and he honestly considered going back to sleep and pretending he had slept through it... Should he look to the last piece of Kuja, of King, in Zidane? Or should he return to the safety of his well-ordered life, and never seek to harm people by demanding choice? He thought about Elizabeth, and what she chose to do, and then his thoughts turned to Garnet, and what *she* would want for him.

Conrad took a deep breath, strode across the room, and opened the door to see Zidane's smiling face. "Yo, Conrad! You ready for a boys' (and one girl's) day out!?"

"Not particularly," Conrad admitted, looking up at Steiner and gulping, "I-I've never really gone out of my house without a chaperon ordained by Mother."

"Come on, like your mom can say 'no' to the general of Alexandria!" Zidane said, slapping the side of the general's chain mail. Steiner rumbled at the monkey-boy in response. "Besides, the shopping's for him, so we can just find what we need and head back. Out and in, super quick, though if you're feeling up to it we can grab lunch on the way."

Conrad was still a little surprised at how fast Zidane spoke, and he played with his fingers with a gulp. “Well, I mean, I might get hungry, but...”

The young man was interrupted by a horrified screech, and everyone turned in surprise to see Countess Abigail, followed closely by Victor. “Conrad, *dear*, what are you doing with this *rabble*?”

“Oh, Mother, I’m sorry, I...” Conrad took a step back into his room to hide from her infuriated face as Simone hid behind her brother.

It was Zidane, as usual, who hopped forward. “We’re asking your son out on a day trip. I figured it was okay, since we’re bringing the general of Alexandria. You know, protect the royal family and all that.”

“Of *course* you *assumed* it would be okay,” Abigail hissed, “Better to ask forgiveness than permission, is that it? And you also *assume* that I would leave Conrad in the hands of an utter *nobody* like him?” She gestured to Steiner with a flippant hand, which made Conrad look at the general as he clenched his gauntleted hands.

“Well, you leave your own safety to the hands of this guy here; is he noble?” Zidane asked, gesturing to Victor. “I know why you don’t like Steiner. He’s a man, isn’t he? So why is this guy okay but Steiner’s not?”

Abigail scoffed, looking away. “Please, you imagine me to be that stupid? I refuse not for his sex, but for those he *associates* with, namely, a flea-bitten rogue, and a *pariah* like the *genocider*.” She looked askance at Steiner, who straightened himself up the way he used to when he tried to silently stare Zidane down on their adventures. She saw through his attempts to intimidate her, and her smile stretched wickedly across her face.

The sinister smirk was the last straw to Simone, who jumped out from behind her brother and shoved a finger accusingly at the countess. “How *dare* you!!” she screamed, “Bert and Trixie are so beautiful and in love it would make you *puke*, and I bet you’ve never known a love as pure as theirs! You better not say another mean word about Trixie, or I’ll...!”

It was at that point that Steiner grabbed her and dragged her back with a hiss, and he turned

apologetically to the countess. “My Lady, my apologies, she is—”

Abigail’s stare was steely as ice. “I see now where my niece has faltered as a ruler. To allow such people to wander the castle and speak out loud as they wish, in front of the *royal family* no less! Conrad!” She called, shooting a glance at her son. Conrad clutched his hands close to him and, with a trembling lip, nodded. “Come here, right now! I forbid from even speaking to this... this dreck!”

Conrad took a step forward, towards his mother, but something made him stop. He felt Zidane’s eyes on him, and he looked askance for a moment, watching the genome’s eyes on him. The eyes that looked so much like King’s... If he went with his mother, the freedom that he dreamed of would remain so for his entire life, and seeing Zidane there made him realize this one, simple fact. He *didn’t* want to abandon his dreams, not just yet. His heart went out to Zidane, and he pleaded with all of his soul. *Help me.*

Zidane paused for a moment, and the Genome’s eyes sparkled, wild and free, just like King’s. “Well then, might as well make it two for two on the royal kidnapping thing,” he said with a smirk.

“I beg your pardon!?” Abigail shouted, but Zidane was already moving, and Conrad felt himself moving in tandem as the genome picked up and tossed the prince over his shoulder before jumping out the window.

Abigail screamed, Simone gasped, and Steiner shouted, but not as loud as Conrad as the young man clutched the back of Zidane’s shirt and cried out loud. “I’m going to die, I’m going to die, I’m going to—”

“Don’t worry, I won’t let you fall!” Zidane replied jovially as he clung, one-handed, to a flag pole, his other hand securely around Conrad’s waist. “Just hold on tight; we’ll be on the ground soon.”

It was at that point that Steiner slammed into the window sill and waved the two of them down. “Zidane, what in the *world* are you doing!?”

“Taking Conrad out on the town! It wasn’t going to happen with his mom breathing down his neck, so we’re going on ahead. You and Simmie can catch up later!” Zidane shifted his shoulder and caused Conrad to squeal out loud, before the monkey-boy jumped down and landed on the turret’s palisade and slipped inside, leaving Steiner with an *infuriated* countess.

“What are you doing!?” Abigail screeched as Steiner turned back around thoughtfully, “Aren’t you supposed to keep things like this from happening!? My little Conrad... you must bring him back this instant!”

“I’ll do my best, My Lady, but I do not know where he is going. I’ll send my best to search the castle and the town this instant,” the general replied. Simone opened her mouth (because they *did* know where Zidane wanted to go!) but one glance from her brother told her that he had lied on purpose.

Abigail let out a frustrated shout, and she stormed off towards the throne room, Victor on her heels.

Queen Garnet sat on her throne, processing the information that Doctor Tot just told her. It just didn’t seem possible, but he would never lie. She felt like a fool; she should have *known* that it wouldn’t be that simple. Doctor Tot, still at her side, made a soft cough, and the queen groaned and rubbed at her eyes. “Doctor Tot, we’ve been through this. It’s not something I can just...”

“...bring up?” the advisor asked, his mustache twitching into a smile. “You’re going to have to tell

him eventually.”

Garnet’s frustrated sigh said more than anything that was on her mind. “Yes, I know, but—”

The door suddenly slammed open and Abigail stormed in like a whirlwind. The queen looked up, brow furrowed in annoyance more at Tot than at the interruption, and the countess strode forward and placed a hand on the table before shouting up. “Your *Majesty*, my Conrad is gone! Abducted! Your general was absolutely *no* help! I must *insist* you put every woman you have on finding him!”

Garnet’s brows knit deeper, and she stood up, confused, “Abducted? How do you know? He might have gone out on an excursion of his own.”

“On his own? Absolutely not!” Abigail took a step forward for emphasis, “One! He would *never* go out on his ‘own’ without my approval, nor a chaperon, and two! I saw the abductor: it was your fiance, Zidane!”

...Silence permeated the room... until Garnet let out a chuckle, one that halted Abigail in her tracks. Garnet continued giggling as she flopped back into her chair, “Auntie, Zidane didn’t *abduct* Conrad. They’re going on an adventure! I can assure you,

Zidane would *never* do something without their permission. Conrad clearly spoke to him, and they made an appointment for today, no problem.”

“He threw the two of them out a *window!*” the countess screeched, pointing at the door as if to show the window they jumped out of, “How dare you laugh at the implications and danger my son was put in!?”

Garnet stared down at her aunt from atop her throne, and she remembered Elizabeth’s plea to Zidane, that he help protect Conrad from their mother’s schemes. “You know, when Zidane attempted to kidnap me back then, I *wanted* to be kidnapped, it’s true. But you know what? Tantalus was only doing it because Uncle Cid wanted to protect me from what Mother and Kuja were doing to Alexandria. In other words, even if Zidane *did* take Conrad by force, he took Conrad from people who are *dangerous* to him. People like *you*.”

Abigail went quiet, and the two glared at each other for what seemed like eternity. The next sound that shot through the air was when the countess snapped her fingers, and Victor stepped up to listen closely. “Find him. I don’t care how. Bring him back

to me. By any means necessary, do you understand?”

Garnet’s eyes whipped to see Victor’s grip on his sword clench, and the mute guard nodded once, turned, and dashed out quietly. The queen stood again, her eyes filled with Ifrit’s fire. “How dare you implicitly tell your aide to harm Zidane? He *can’t*, but that’s not the point. To harm the prince consort is to wound the heart of Alexandria!”

“He is not the prince consort yet, Your Majesty,” Abigail spat. “In fact, you could say that, given his lineage, Conrad is closer to being a ‘prince’ consort than Zidane could ever be!”

And there it was; Elizabeth’s fears were true; Abigail admitted them right in the throne room. Garnet gulped down the wad of bile in her throat, and she sat back down in her throne, crossing her legs with an authoritative air. “Victor cannot hurt Zidane. Conrad will return to the castle, but he won’t return to *you*. You don’t deserve someone as kind and loving as Elizabeth and Conrad. And when you realize that you don’t have any power over anyone else here, you’ll go back to Treno, and you’ll continue living your life in your mansion, sipping cocktails and slurping caviar, and you’ll pretend you

are something ‘more’ than you are: a fragile, sad woman who cares only for herself.”

Abigail watched Garnet for a moment, as if considering what she could do, but Garnet knew there was nothing she *could* do. To attack the queen, and not only that, a woman who controlled the gods themselves... even the countess knew it was a stupid thing to do.

Countess Abigail turned and swept from the room. Garnet watched her go, her frown as icy as Shiva’s. Doctor Tot shifted on his feet, and Garnet let out another groan. “I *know* I need to tell him, doctor!”

“I understand you’re under a lot of stress, but he really does need to know,” was Tot’s simple reply.

Garnet pressed the balls of her hands against her eyes and *groaned*.

Conrad didn’t stop whimpering until Zidane set him on solid ground, and then he fell backwards against the wall. “Wh-what are you doing?” he squealed, his knees shaking as Zidane hopped down another stair.

The genome halted and looked up at the whimpering prince. “Relax, didn’t you hear me talking to Steiner? We’re still on for the shopping trip. Come on, follow me, I know where all the guards’ routes are; we can slip by them easily.”

Conrad watched as Zidane skipped down the stairs towards the bottom, and when the young prince found his legs, he followed hesitantly. “But-but why? Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what? Helping you out of the castle and away from your psycho mom?” Zidane turned around and smirked devilishly. “Done it once before; why can’t I do it again?”

“No, I mean.” Well, yes partially that as well, but... ‘I mean, why me?’ He jogged a little bit to keep up with Zidane, who was nearly all the way down the stairs and was already unable to hear the prince very well. “I mean, you don’t have help me or anything. You could have just let Mother... well...” He got very quiet again at the thought, and that’s when Zidane stopped and looked up the stairway.

“Well, what? I know what you’re trying to say though. And the reason is, you asked me to.” Conrad blinked, confused, and Zidane lifted his hand,

pointing to his two eyes, “Don’t tell me this isn’t what you wanted.”

“I-I never said I didn’t! I just...” Conrad continued walking down the stairs, catching up with Zidane and looking sheepishly at his cufflinks. “I just thought you’d hate me. That you’d leave me to her, because of what... What Elizabeth told you...”

Zidane scoffed. “What, that you wanted to marry Dagger?” Conrad blinked again, and Zidane sighed. “Sorry, Garnet, that’s her other name. You know.”

“A... pet name?”

“Hah! Yeah, we’ll go with that.” Zidane continued down the way and Conrad kept forward as well. “Anyway, I don’t really care what you or your mother or Elizabeth think or are worried about. Dagger and I talked about it, about us not having ‘viable offspring’ or whatever Doctor Tot said. I told her that she could marry someone else. You know what she said? ‘I don’t want to share you, Zidane, so I don’t want you to have to share me’.”

Zidane hopped to the bottom stair and looked back up at Conrad. “So it doesn’t matter what anyone wants or hopes. I know she’ll say ‘no’, and that’s all I need to ‘know’.”...He chuckled at his pun

as he waited for Conrad to finally came huffing and puffing to the final steps, gasping for air. Zidane smiled a bit at the young man. “Heh, you’re not really athletic, are you? I mean, you got the whole, ‘gentle royalty’ thing that Garnet does, but I guess you’re not as active as she is?”

“She’s active?” he gasped, leaning on his knees, and Zidane smiled widely.

“It’s one of the reasons I love her so much. Now come on, let’s keep moving.”

“Uh, sir— I mean, Zidane? Wait, please.” Zidane paused and turned around, noting that Conrad looked surprised at his own outburst, and the prince hesitated a moment before speaking up. “While we’re walking, can you talk to me? I mean, talk to me about King? Tell me about him?...He uhm...” Conrad looked down at his cufflinks, and gulped down his own fear and self loathing. “He was... the most powerful man in Treno. In all of Alexandria. The only man who didn’t have to take orders from anyone. The only man who didn’t *want* to. And I mean, I don’t think anyone knew him as well as... uhm... well...” He looked up sheepishly at Zidane, twiddling his thumbs. “C-can you tell me? What was he like?”

Zidane paused for a bit, looking Conrad up and down, and he cocked his head slightly. “I’m sorry. I can’t tell you anything about King. I only really stole from him once.” Conrad halted in surprise, completely befuddled, but the moment he opened his mouth, the genome continued. “Nah, Can’t tell you about King, but I *can* tell you about my brother, Kuja, who was the only man in Alexandria who didn’t take orders from anyone.”

Conrad released a breath of relief and smiled brightly. He knew that he shouldn’t be so happy to hear about the man who tried to destroy the world, but at this point, he kind of didn’t care, really.

23. The New King

Adelbert Steiner and Simone Steiner kept moving through the streets of Alexandria. The general had sent out several factions of soldiers, mostly to locations away from the markets, and the two moved first to the high-end market street. The two talked about this and that as they strolled leisurely down the street, though they mostly caught up about Beatrix and how she was feeling. “Only a few more weeks? By the Crystal, I can’t even imagine. I’m going to be a father in a month and a half...”

“I’m going to be an auntie soon!” Simone giggled. She hummed playfully for a moment until a thought struck her, and she made a repulsed face. “Ugh, I hope I’m a better auntie than Countess Abigail.”

Steiner bit his tongue to keep from replying to that; as a general he needed to protect the royal family, even their reputations. Instead, he changed the topic rather indelicately. “So, jewelry, yes? Do you know any good jewelers in town?”

“You know Father never really dealt in that sort of thing. Big, expensive rings and necklaces and

stuff. We just sold food to old ladies who couldn't walk to the market proper. Well, that's what *I* did. So I've never really known where they all are."

Steiner let out a sigh, and nodded. "Luckily, I've had to know where most things are around Alexandria, first as captain and then as general, so I can get us to where some of the more famous ones are. Let's just hope Zidane has thought of the those stores."

"Probably! He knows that's where you'll go first!" Simone replied, skipping ahead with a smile. Steiner smiled amicably at his sister; since when did she know Zidane so well? And a lot faster than he learned....She always was the more open-minded type.

The two continued down the road, although with Simone's new jogging speed, Steiner had to power-walk too, to keep up. They wound their way through the crowds and arrived in the main thoroughfare, past the food stores and a clothing shop, and down the way to a fancy place that hadn't been working as much as before, given Alexandria's renewal, but because it was so popular beforehand, it still got good work. When the Steiners approached, the younger Steiner window-shopped for a moment as

the elder one watched out for any suspicious movements. “Ohhh, this ring is so pretty! There isn’t one big diamond, but there are these cute little rubies and sapphires. Oh, and *this* one has a pretty opal, and oh! I think this one’s made entirely out of obsidian!”

“That’s nice, Simmie, now, can you please look out for Zidane? I specifically sent the other guards away from here because I ordered that I’d be searching this area. Therefore, the only eyes we have are our own and I’d rather not have them focused on jewels.”

Simone shrugged, pouting a bit, but she turned around and scanned the street. “Hmm, I wonder where they could be? They got away from the castle a lot faster than we did, or at least they got away from *us* pretty quickly, so they should have caught up at this point.”

Steiner grunted, his arms crossed, but before he could open his mouth, a piercing shout erupted from the crowds. “General Steiner! Oh man, General Steiner, I knew it was you!!” The two turned to the voice, and a young man in a large floppy cap jogged up and waved the siblings down. “Sir! My name’s Ryan! Ryan! I’m the one Zidane talked about? Did

Zidane talk about me? He did, right? My name's Ryan, did I tell you that?"

Steiner flailed at the man, angry at the situation and the sudden interruption. "Alright, alright! Calm down! Stay back!" he growled, using his patented anger management issues to its best effect. "We're busy now! Stand aside, this is official business!"

Ryan hopped back to avoid the general's angry swipe, and he nodded quickly, his smile wide. "Sure, I get it, sir! But I wanted to get it on the record that everyone in the castle knows I want to join the Pluto Knights! Or at least the most important people know! Like you! I heard that there was an opening, and I could show you my swordsmanship, to prove I'm good at protecting people, right?" He pulled at the wooden sword at his side. "Here, you said you're busy, so why don't I show you right now?"

"Are you kidding me!?" Steiner shouted, "Not in a busy street! Are you an idiot!?"

Before things could escalate further, a hand was placed on Ryan's shoulder, and the three turned to see Zidane smiling at everyone. "Hey ho, the gang's all here." He looked at Ryan, smirked, and shook his shoulder. "Plus one. But I don't think our friend would mind. Hey Rad, you okay with that?"

Conrad came out from behind Zidane, already dressed in new apparel: a new shirt and pants that were obviously more peasant than noble, along with a muffin-cap similar to Ryan's. When he noted the Steiners staring at him, he clutched his wrist and smiled. "We were a little late; I traded my clothes for... these ones. H-how do I look?"

"Awesome!" Ryan exclaimed, twirling out of Zidane's hand to wrap an arm around the suddenly-terrified Conrad's shoulders. 'Yeah, you look amazing, nice colors; they match very well!' He shook Conrad a bit, chuckling loudly... "...Who are you again?"

There was complete, confused and unabashed silence from the group as the crowds milled around them. Zidane snapped them out of it by clapping his hands loudly. "Alright, time for shopping!" he crowed, pumping his fist and walking past his friends, approaching the store. 'Come on, Steiner, Rad, let's go.' He turned around and shrugged at the others. "Simone, Ryan, can you hang back for a bit? The general's a big guy, and all five of us in a small store is a little much, right?"

"Awww! When you're finished, can I spend a moment to look at all the pretty bracelets?" Simone

asked. “I-I might want to get something a little... you know, small?”

“Sure, Simmie, we can take a bit longer. What do you think, Rad?”

“O-okay, I mean...” Conrad twiddled his thumbs, but when Zidane turned and cocked an eyebrow, the prince shook his head. “...What I meant was, it’s not like I want to go back to the castle anytime soon anyway...!”

Zidane laughed out loud, “See, I knew you could do it!” he said, opening the door and waltzing in. Conrad took a deep breath and jogged into the store after him, and Steiner groaned, taking up the rear with a grumble.

“Rad?” the general asked, “Really? That’s worse than ‘Dagger’.”

“Yeah well, give him some slack, it was thought up on the fly,” Zidane replied, looking around the necklaces, “Plus, it’s pretty ‘cool’, am I right? Get it, because ‘rad’ means—”

All Steiner could imagine was that Conrad wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, but the kid wasn’t really all that confident, and the last thing the general wanted was to make the prince feel bad.

“Very well, very well, so I suppose the real question is ‘why are we shopping for jewelry’ then?”

“We’re finding an engagement ring for you and Beatrix,” Zidane said, glancing at the different rings on display.

...

...

... “What!?” Steiner shouted, and Conrad slid into a corner as the general stomped forward to grab Zidane’s shoulder and whip him around to glare the genome in the eye, “What are you talking about!? I thought for a *moment* that you might stop butting your nose into everyone’s business, but how *wrong* I was!!”

Zidane shrugged, unflappable as usual. “Eh, you two have taken too long to do it, and I was afraid you’d forget; you’ve been so busy focusing on Alexandria and everything, so I’m helping you focus a bit on your own life. I wouldn’t be a very good Heart if I let everyone in the city work themselves to death.”

Steiner growled, but released his friend. “You do realize that the men aren’t the ones who propose to

women in Alexandria, right? That's always been a Lindblum thing."

"Yeah, and we don't use rings either, but that's not important right now," Zidane replied, "Come on, what does Beatrix like? I'm sure you can afford *anything* here."

"That's not the point. I don't, I—" Steiner huffed and glanced where Zidane's eyes flit about, and the general took a moment to find his words before he sighed. "It's just that I-I'm not sure this is what she wants. She's always been heavily independent. We're... we support each other, yes, but I wonder if she would be happier without someone to tie her down."

Zidane paused, and he turned to look up at Steiner. "Uhm... you do realize she's *pregnant* right? What do you *think* she wants to do? Hole up with Simmie for the next sixteen years until the kid's grown? Have you ever considered that she hasn't asked you because she's a *pariah* and probably is afraid you'd say 'no'?" Steiner froze, looking Zidane straight in the eye, and the genome continued, a little less heatedly than before, "Look, I've been doing this 'Alexandria needs a Heart' and doing the submissive consort thing because it's best

for Dagger, but you know that the entire world doesn't work like that, right? Not every single couple is going to have to do things by the book. You two are the most unique couple in all of Alexandria. Suck it up and tell her your feelings, because she sure as hell isn't going to be telling you *hers*; you know that's not her thing."

Steiner pursed his lips, and placed his hand on his chin in thought.... "I hate it when you have a point."

"No wonder you're always angry then, since I always do."

"Rub it in some more, monkey." Steiner huffed but continued browsing the wares as Zidane took a few steps back to stand next to Conrad, who was beginning to calm down from the lingering tension.

"...I've never seen friends bicker so much," the prince said softly as he hugged his arms.

Zidane's smile was wide. "That's how you know we're close," he explained simply.

Simone watched as Ryan rocked back and forth on his heels, and the younger Steiner eyed him

curiously. “So you want to be a Pluto Knight, was it?”

“Do I!?” Ryan said immediately, turning to face Simone with sparkling eyes. ‘That has basically been my life’s goal ever since General Steiner was first inducted into the army and they started allowing men to join! I promised myself that I’d be one of them someday too! But then well, they kinda already had nine, so I couldn’t join.’ He looked over at Simone, eyes knit with confusion. “Why *do* the Pluto Knights have to have nine members anyway?”

“Beats me,” Simone replied with a shrug, “Probably tradition.”

“Yeah well! I’m going to be the ninth one now that General Steiner’s not a member anymore! I’ve wanted to show off my skills, but things have been so busy with the wedding and all, I wonder if they’ve forgotten about me.”

Simone took a moment to think about it, crossing her arms and biting her lip. “Don’t think about it like that! Everyone’s working so hard, they’re not ignoring or forgetting you; I’m sure that we can speak with the Pluto Knight captain. I was planning on visiting the castle next week; you can come with me and we’ll talk to him!”

Simone didn't think it was possible for Ryan to brighten anymore, but when his smile widened until threatened to break, the young woman was both surprised and vaguely creeped out at his enthusiasm. "Oh man, that sounds great! When I join, I'll be the best Pluto Knight there ever was!"...He paused for a moment when he saw Simone's icy stare, and shrugged helplessly, "...second to General Steiner, of course."

"That's better."

The two fell into a much more easy conversation about this and that, but before they could get too deep into the logistics of whether or not a mu could take a hedgehog pie in a fight, a chill ran down the woman's spine, and she turned quickly, scanning the crowds. "Something wrong, Simmie?" Ryan asked, turning to glance where she was looking.

"Shh," Simone replied, holding out a hand up to halt him. He looked around the crowds, pouted a bit, and shrugged, but before he could turn back to the jewelry, the woman took a step forward and called out. "I knew it! You followed us!!"

The game was up, as it were, and Abigail's bodyguard stepped out of the crowds to stare down the young Steiner. "Hey you!" she called to him,

“You better not be here to hurt anyone! We’re having a nice time and you don’t have to ruin it!”

Victor ignored Simone and looked around her for her brother. She was fairly tall for a woman, given her Steiner blood, but he still managed to glance over her shoulder and look into the window of the store they were standing in front of. When he noticed not only the general, but also the prince within, he sidestepped her to get to the jewelry store, intent on reaching the prince within.

He was not expecting Simone to brazenly sidestep him right back, and he nearly ran straight into her. She stared into his eyes, brows knit, and put her hands on her hips. “And just where do you think you’re going!?” Victor halted only for a moment, and he stared back at her with a frown. “You’re not cool if you think that you can just keep quiet and broody like that! No one thinks that’s awesome!”

“Victor, no!” Everyone halted when Conrad rushed from the store with Zidane on his heels. The man had noticed that they were found, and thought it better to keep from hiding instead of creating trouble for anyone else. “It’s okay, Victor’s mute; he’s not being silent on purpose. Victor, please! You can’t just go assaulting people in the streets like this!”

Victor seemed to look like he could do whatever he damn well pleased, but before Simone could continue to put herself in harm's way, Zidane put himself between Victor and Conrad, which allowed Simone to back off slightly, since she knew exactly who could take the bodyguard in a fight. "Look, Victor. Why don't we have a talk, okay? I know you don't want to make a scene out here, so why don't we all cool down before things get crazy, alright?"

Victor placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, but before he could draw it, Ryan was standing next to him, eyes shining wide. Victor's confusion was evident on his face, but his eyes widened akin to saucers when Ryan lifted his hand and gestured to himself before waving his hand in a strange pattern. He then pointed at Victor and shrugged in question.

...and to everyone's surprise, Victor, when he finally snapped out of his confusion, lifted his own hand and responded similarly. "Your name's Victor, huh?" Ryan asked as if the others hadn't been shouting his name previously. He then lifted both of his hands and began signing.

The silence was deafening as the two began signing to each other in the middle of the busy street without a care in the world, right up until Steiner

himself extricated himself from the store. “What’s going on here? Zidane, what have you done this time!?”

“First off, we’re going to have to talk about how whenever something weird happens it’s supposedly my fault, because *apparently* Ryan could talk to mute people this whole time.”

“Huh?” Ryan asked, suddenly realizing that there were *other people* around. He smiled brightly and nodded. “Oh yeah, my old man was a mercenary in the old days, protecting old VIPs and stuff, but then one time he wouldn’t give up some important cargo and the bandits who caught him cut out his tongue. The healers said was a miracle he didn’t bleed out, but my old man wouldn’t be caught dead dying to something like that. So anyway the whole family had to learn how to sign at that point, so...” He waved his hands as if to show off how to speak. “I was asking him, and he said he’s here to get Prince Conrad back to the castle, ‘under any means necessary’. Which is hilarious, because I mean, there’s no one here whose name is Conrad. I mean, that’s so—”

...He paused when he saw Zidane purse his lips and cough, and the prince rubbed at his wrists in

worry until Ryan let out a very obvious gasp. “Wait a minute, *you’re* Prince...”

Simone clapped her hand over his mouth and coughed. “Well now that we’re all acquainted, maybe you could *keep* to signing instead of shouting about secret information?”

Ryan blinked, confused, and Victor pursed his lips before signing the situation. When Ryan nodded in reply, Simone sighed and released him. “But wait, so the point was that Prince Conrad was kidnapped? He doesn’t seem kidnapped to me.”

“I’m *not*.” Conrad insisted, his voice taking a high lilt, “I asked to be taken. N-not out loud, but like, yeah. I wanted...” Conrad fidgeted, a little worried, but Zidane winked at him to encourage him. “...I wanted to make my own decisions! I’m not a child, and I don’t want to marry Queen Garnet!”

...Steiner coughed loudly when he noticed they were gaining a rather large crowd. “We really shouldn’t be doing this in the street... Can we table this until we get to a more discreet location?”

Victor knit his eyebrows, but when Ryan signed a quick “*It’s okay, you can trust these guys, they’re*

good people,” the bodyguard sneered and signed back before shrugging and gesturing for them to lead on.

Lowell was *not* happy when the entirety of Ruby’s Theater was filled with several people that *weren’t* paying customers, and soon the area became crowded only with the “general and his posse”. Zidane ended up sitting on one of the tables so they could get closer and talk without being loud, and Conrad ended up sitting between Steiner and Victor, because neither trusted the other not to grab him and run.

“Y’all are lucky that I’m not doing a performance right now,” Ruby muttered when they first arrived, crossing her arms as she eyed everyone suspiciously, “I thought Tantalus was bad, but ya always seem ta attract the weirdest folk, Zidane!”

“It’s a gift,” the genome replied with a winning smile. She groaned and brushed him off before tromping backstage, and Zidane turned to Conrad, eager to get the conversation finished quickly so they could be out of Ruby’s and Lowell’s hair, “So here’s what we got so far: Rad wanted to see outside

of the castle for a day, and asked me to take him away from his mother. His mother, on the other hand, asked their bodyguard to bring him back. Sounds good so far?”

There were plenty of nods all around, and Zidane clapped his hands. “Problem solved! We finished our shopping trip, Rad got some new duds, Steiner got his ring, and we all go home with no one getting angry or in trouble.”

“Victor says his name’s ‘Conrad’,” Ryan piped up.

“Yeah well, *you’re* not ‘Conrad’, so you can’t say what he wants to be known as,” Zidane replied, staring straight at Victor, who glared daggers right back at the genome.

Zidane was completely unfazed by the glare, so Victor signed a bit, which Ryan translated, “*This does seem like we’re technically in the clear, but there is a very good chance that Countess Abigail will enforce the rule that Prince Conrad won’t be able to meet with anyone she does not approve of the moment he returns. It’s for your own good, Prince Conrad.*”

Conrad groaned and clutched at his new muffin-cap. “Which will be basically everyone but her, Victor, and Queen Garnet. *Maybe* Elizabeth, but she’s on thin ice now that she’s been helping Zidane out.”

“Vicky, can I call you Vicky?” Zidane asked in a way that said ‘I’m gunna do it anyway’, “I know we’ve only really known Rad for a day or two, barring like, Steiner over here, but I assure you that if Rad *really* doesn’t want to be around his mother, I will have absolutely *no* qualms with ensuring his freedom, and I know that you and she can’t stop me.”

Victor’s frown creased, but before things could get heated, General Steiner took a deep breath and spoke up. “Sir Victor. Perhaps I could explain my feelings, as Queen Garnet’s guardian through our adventure.” There was quiet for a bit, but Victor finally shook his head and gestured for the man to continue. ‘When I first met Zidane, and was outside of the castle with then-Princess Garnet, I was convinced that it was in her best interest to be returned to the castle, where she would be safe. Despite what Zidane said or what Her Majesty insisted, I refused to listen to them. I loved Alexandria, just as much then as I do now, but I was

so confident in my righteousness that I walked Her Majesty straight into a trap of her mother's creation.' Steiner paused, his eyes glazing over as he recalled the memory. "...I will never forget the moment when I saw her on that altar. She had gotten her Eidolons removed, and she lay there as if dead, and I..."

Zidane rubbed at his mouth and bit his lip as the entire table went quiet. The unease was palpable, up until Steiner sucked in a breath through his teeth and continued: "...I understand how you feel; Countess Abigail has run Treno well enough for your feeling, and the people you care about are safe under her rules. However, I hope you will listen to me when I say that people should listen to the voices all around them, rather than the voice of one person in power. Prince Conrad is smarter than we take him for; he says he doesn't want to be beholden to his mother's demands, and I ask you, to please, trust his feelings, and be there to defend him from those who do not."

The room was deadly silent, with Victor considering Steiner's words. It was with a little trepidation that the guard turned to the prince, raised his hands, and answered: *"I understand your feelings, Prince Conrad, and at the end of the day, I wish for nothing but your continued happiness."*

However, I am unsure what we can do to speak to Countess Abigail. We have no power over her, and even if Queen Garnet were to take your side, the moment you leave this castle, unless you are titled, there is nothing you can do.”

“That’s true...” Conrad muttered under his breath, crossing his arms and thinking to himself, “Mother is too powerful, and the landed nobles of Treno are not like to take anyone’s side but hers. The only person who would be safe from her laws would be someone who is at least close to her equal.” He bit his bottom lip in thought, lowering his voice for the others to consider what they could do. Perhaps they *could* run away? It wouldn’t be so bad if he lived out in Dali somewhere, or even in that new hamlet in Zamo Basin. He heard that men of the destitute in Treno were moving out that way, so it wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to change his name and—

Zidane jumped up so quickly that Victor leapt from his seat in surprise. Everyone looked up at the genome, who swished his tail and smirked smugly.

“I’ve got it!”

The castle was abuzz as Victor strode straight into the building with Zidane and Conrad in tow. Steiner had gone to take his sister home and spend time with Beatrix, and when Ryan made a big show of not wanting to leave the general's side, he sighed rather loudly and pulled out a slip of paper. "Just take this to the barracks and give it to Pluto Knight I. Zidane can tell you where it is. Now go; Prince Conrad has more important things to do than to listen to your prattling."

That seemed to make Ryan a little happier, and he clutched the referral close to his chest on the way across the moat; when they arrived at the castle, Zidane led them through the castle before pointing into the small room where the Pluto Knights congregated, and he gave the kid a wave. "Good luck!" He said, though he doubted Ryan needed it, given that the knights were still looking for their ninth member.

When Ryan walked through the doorway, shoulders hunched in trepidation, Zidane gave him a thumbs-up before ushering the others on to the throne room, the genome exuding a confident air. The plan was *basically* foolproof; there was no need to worry.

It was Elizabeth who received word of their return, and she was the one who passed on the knowledge to her mother. Countess Abigail immediately rushed to the throne room as soon as she heard. By the time she arrived, however, the entire room was full of people glowering in her direction. Garnet was sitting upon her throne with Zidane lounging on the arm of the chair, and Victor and Conrad stood to the side. The young prince was sweating, but Victor, as usual, remained stoic. Elizabeth stood at Abigail's side as the countess looked to her son and gave a sickly sweet smile. "Ahh, I see you've brought my sweetling back, Victor. There shall be a bonus for you when we get back. Conrad, come here, dear."

Her son didn't move, and neither did Victor. Abigail gave them a moment before her entire demeanor changed, her sweet facade turning dangerous. Her eyes flit to the smug Zidane and his swishing tail before going back to scowling at her son. "What nonsense did that monkey put in your head, Conrad? You know your place is at my side, so *move*."

Conrad looked to Zidane, but the genome raised his hands and shook his head. If he *did* start saying anything now, he'd only prove Abigail right. The

words, and the sentiment, had to come from the prince. Said prince closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and turned back to his mother. “I-I don’t want to. Mother. I don’t want to go by your side. I don’t want to live in a house where I am little more than a bargaining chip in political games, and I definitely don’t want to marry my own cousin! I don’t care if we’re not really related; I love her too much to use her like that!”

The silence that permeated through the room was horrifying, and Conrad’s breathing picked up its pace as he finished his speech. His mother’s countenance darkened, and her face turned a deep shade of red as she responded. “How *dare* you give me lip in public! You are nothing, do you hear me? You are a bargaining chip because even the disease-ridden monkey knows that his place is in subservience to a woman! You will never be anything more than my son, and if I tell you to *bark like a Bandersnatch*, you will do it, by Ifrit!”

Conrad trembled, his lip wobbling, but when Victor placed a hand on his shoulder, the prince sucked in a breath and let out a cry. “Th-that isn’t necessarily true, Mother. There is something more that I can be. Queen Garnet!” Conrad turned back to the throne and Zidane’s tail swished quickly as the

prince's words tumbled out, his words coming on instinct rather than emotion, "I beseech thee, assist Treno in making a final verdict for King's Estate! Mother should not hold it, for she is already a Countess, but she keeps it under wraps as another political tool. I say to you, make the decree; to whom shall the estate and the title belong to?"

Abigail's eyes narrowed, not quite sure what was happening at that moment, just up until Conrad mentioned King's Estate. The cogs in her mind whirled, but Elizabeth let out a shout when the lady-in-waiting realized what their plan was. Countess Abigail hissed at her daughter before taking a few steps forward and beseeching Garnet on her own. "Your Majesty, you cannot! To just take a title without justifiable reason goes beyond your power!"

Garnet threaded her fingers together and smiled brightly. "My dear aunt, I am not 'taking' a title, for there *is* no person who holds the title of King in Treno. Now, we understand that King has disappeared, and since then you have remained steward of the estate, but you are *not* King....I think Conrad makes a valid argument. You clearly are very busy, ordering the lands of Treno the way you do. You cannot possibly handle the affairs of two estates at once. And so, I bequeath to Conrad the

title of ‘Steward of the King’. If the true King returns, the title will return to him, but until such a day as that passes, Conrad is to be given the title, the power, and the estate of King.”

Her eyes darted to see Victor, who took a step to stand between Conrad and the countess, and Garnet noted his movement. “He will need a good guardian, don’t you think? If Victor wishes, he may join Conrad at the estate, and if I hear at any point that a *hair* on their heads has been touched, no matter the reason, you will assume responsibility. Treno is *your* city, and I expect it to remain *safe*. Is. That. Clear?”

Elizabeth squealed a “yes!!” out loud, despite herself, but she halted when Abigail turned to glare at her daughter. Her daughter looked back and curtsied in humility, but afterward jogged over to stand next to her brother and curtsy in that same reverent way. “My Lord King, it is a pleasure to hear of your promotion, as it were. Please remember your worthless sister when you return to your place in Treno.”

Conrad was trembling now in excitement, and he took his sister’s hands before allowing himself to show his true side. Instead of refraining, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders and shook his head.

“No, no, Beth! You’re not worthless, you’re my sister! Thank you, you saved me!” He turned to Garnet and Zidane, his eyes threatening tears, and finally looked at Victor, who was beaming at his charge. “I-I can’t... I...!”

The new Lord King couldn’t handle his emotions, and he broke down crying. Elizabeth, still held captive by her brother’s arms, reached out and hugged him back. “You absolute fool. How are people going to respect you when you’re simpering like that? I bet the first King would have laughed at you.”

“Ugh, just let me have this, sis,” Conrad muttered, sniffing loudly and curling closer to Elizabeth’s embrace.

The display of sibling affection wasn’t ignored by Garnet, but the queen looked down upon Abigail from her throne. The countess was livid, her face nearly turning purple in mortification. “Auntie. I will tell you one more time. Go home. There is nothing left for you in this castle, and I’ll be damned if I allow you to ‘assist’ me with my wedding. It is proceeding apace, and if you are not here simply to watch the ceremony, then I’ll kindly ask you to leave and never bother my family again.”

“Your Maje— I am simpl— I *am* your family!” Abigail finally screeched, her rage boiling over.

“No, ‘Auntie’. If you recall, *I am not my mother’s daughter*. As a result, the only people I need to accept as family are those I *choose* to be. Begone, Countess Abigail.”

The Countess of Treno opened her mouth, but found there to be nothing to say. She trembled and shook and bit her lip until it bled. Finally she let out a horrific, rage fueled scream. Victor clutched his sword by the pommel as the countess drew her finger up in accusation and screamed, “You are nothing, Queen Garnet. You are nothing but common filth, fit only to root in the muck with your baseborn *pig* of a fiancé. Your kingdom will fall; the gods themselves will judge you for stealing the throne from the *righteous* nobility, and when you are cast into the gutters, weak and worthless, you will *beg* me for forgiveness, and you will *not* receive it! May your children die in their cribs, and may your family tree *burn* to its roots!”

“Do not presume to tell *me* what the gods think of my leadership, Countess,” Garnet said, standing from her throne and speaking in an even tone, ‘Our own guardian deity, Alexander, would never come to

your call. Your curses are nothing, and your jeers even less so. Be thankful I do not ask Lord Ramuh, Perfect Judge, to judge *you*. If he were to judge between us, I wonder whom he will think to be found wanting.’ Abigail flinched as Garnet lifted her head, looking down on the countess as if she were little more than a rat. “Shall I summon him? Shall we see how we each weigh on the Scales of Destiny?”

Abigail squawked, her eyes darting about the room as if she could *feel* the eyes of the Judge of All bearing down upon her. The answer to Garnet’s question was one that Abigail already knew, but her pride refused to let her admit it out loud. There was only one thing left to do.

She curtsied as low as she must to show deference before turning and walking out of the throne room alone. The only things she could keep were her title and her life, and at that point, it would have to be enough.

Garnet waited a moment, just in case the countess returned, but when she was sure that her family was safe in the room, she dropped back onto the throne and reached up to caress Zidane’s jaw. “You stupid, boorish, smart, perfect man. How do you do it? How

do you somehow manage to make everyone happy? I wish I could marry you right now.”

“As far as I’m concerned, we already are. The ceremony is only a formality,” Zidane replied, reaching down to steal a kiss from his fiancée.

It was at that point that King approached the stage and knelt low, bowing his head low in humility. “My queen, I swear to you that King’s Estate shall always be yours to command as long as I live.”

Garnet took the moment to continue kissing her fiancée before turning to King, who was now flanked by Elizabeth and Victor, and the queen smiled brightly. “Right now, King, I want you to focus on becoming a great steward of the people; establish yourself as a leader of people, and protect your power. With Victor at your side, I’m sure you will prove yourself a capable man, which is something Alexandria needs at this moment.”

Garnet gestured for him to stand, and Conrad stood up with a flourish. “Your Majesty, I shall do whatever I can for you. Words cannot express my happiness that you trust me with your lands. That you would allow Victor to stay with me, I can’t...” He sniffled a little, and Elizabeth groaned good-

naturedly. Conrad chose to ignore his sister and regarded Victor instead. “If we’re going to be spending time together, I suppose I’ll have to learn how to sign to you....Will you be willing to teach me, Victor?”

Victor’s smile said it all, and as a result, Conrad didn’t even need a translator when his guardian signed, “*Of course, Lord King.*”

Zidane’s smile was so bright his face threatened to crack, but when he turned to see Garnet, he saw she was deep in thought, and the genome’s tail swished slowly. The worries of a monarch were never over, were they...?

24. Two Bouts of Sudden News

Beatrix felt a little disappointed in herself as she washed the dishes from her meal. It had only been a few hours, and already she felt stir crazy. She was coming along enough that even lifting a sword for more than a few moments began tiring her out, and she found that now she had no energy to use on the garden she had been working on outside. Not to mention she felt like she was constantly eating, and she had other things she wanted to do aside from cooking and eating, cooking and eating, cooking and...

...The wooden bowl slipped from her soapy fingers and clattered to the bottom of the water-filled basin, and Beatrix screamed, throwing the dishrag across the room, where it splat on the wall and slid down to the floor. Beatrix hated wooden dishes; she wanted to shatter the damned bowl like the porcelain ones at the castle, but that damn, stupid, idiotic Simone had to *make her own dishes* like she was *better* than everyone, and...!

No, no, that's not true, that's not what she wanted to think of when Simone came to mind. She knew that her emotions would run high when she was pregnant... This was just pregnancy hysteria that housewives gossip about every month. She knew it, but she couldn't... she couldn't...

Beatrix leaned on the counter, grabbed at her hair, and screamed for several seconds before degenerating into sobs. She hated this. She hated *all* of this. This wasn't fair. It wasn't *fair!* She was going to be a great warrior, that was her dream, and now she was a pariah, with no liege to work under. There was nothing left for her. Her life was *over*. She only had to wait for Bert to find another strong, kind woman in the army and he would throw her aside like— No. No Bert would never do that. He was better than that, she *knew* it.

She heard the door being unlocked, and she nearly fell over in surprise. She pushed herself fully up to her feet and rubbed her eyes, taking deep breaths to keep herself composed. When she heard the door open, her eye widened when she heard the familiar clank of her lover's armor. She expected Simone to return, but to return with Adelbert? After all of the horrible things she was thinking, even

despite herself, she couldn't help but feel guilty as they walked up the stairs into the kitchen.

“Heyyyyy there Trixie! We're back—” Simone paused as she walked into the room; Beatrix had done her best to wash her face and look presentable, but even the way she carried herself, coupled with the wet face, proved that something was wrong, and the younger Steiner's heart immediately went out to Beatrix. “Oh no, what's the matter? Do you need me to do the dishes? You must be tired—”

“No! No, I'm fine, I swear, I just—” Beatrix shook her head. “I just... a little female hysteria, that's all.”

Adelbert waited at the doorway as Simone crossed over to hug Beatrix, but the woman didn't respond to it. The general took a step forward, unsure what to do. He wanted to say something, but wasn't sure how to approach her. She was hurting, he could see, but if she said she was fine, she usually didn't like him pushing it. But this seemed like something different than just worrying about her soldiers, and he drew his hand down to palm the tiny box with the ring....Was Zidane right? Was she afraid that he wouldn't want to stay with her? Or was she feeling that she was trapped by him? Would

she like the ring, or would she absolutely deny him?...He hadn't felt this horrified and scared in... well... since they stared down Necron himself.

Simone, upon realizing that Beatrix was ignoring her attempts to cheer her up, turned to look at her brother and gesture to the pariah. Adelbert tensed, but he took a deep breath and took a step forward. "Uhm... Beatrix? Is there... anything that you want to say? Are you sure you're okay?"

Beatrix wanted to scream. She wanted to shout and push them away, but she knew that wasn't what they deserved. She shook her head and grabbed at it... "I-I'm fine, I-I don't know what— I can't—" She let out a frustrated growl and shook her head yet again. "I don't know!"

Adelbert took another step forward and clasped his large hand around the box in his pocket. "Beatrix. I don't know why you're feeling this way, and all I wish I could do is help you. I'm not sure how I can, but Zidane was... we were talking. And he was saying that maybe I could..." The general coughed and fidgeted, causing Beatrix to look at him with a small hint of annoyance. "...It's just that. I have..."

“Come on now, Bert! Stop beating around the bush! Just out with it!” Beatrix shouted, aggravated at her lover’s hemming and hawing. At least she could shout at him without too much guilt, given how she usually acted when he did this back at the castle. At least she could take comfort in the fact that no matter what, Adelbert wouldn’t change at the end of the day.

...Beatrix’s eye nearly burst from her socket when he lifted his hand and she saw the box. She knew what type it was, and her jaw dropped instantly as Adelbert shoved it up to her face immediately following her shout. “Lady Beatrix if you don’t mind would you marry me please!?”

...The pariah stared at the box, her brow furrowed, and she looked up at her love. “...Well? Where’s the ring?”

“OH!” Adelbert popped the box open and revealed a small ring encrusted with several small, multicolored gems all around the outside. “...I-it would fit... under your gauntlet. When you return to the battlefield,” he offered.

Beatrix’s head snapped up to look Adelbert in the eye, and she opened her mouth. “...When I...?”

“Well, you’ll be training again after the child is born, right? I didn’t want the ring to be too big or else it’d bother you in your armor, is it... do you like ___”

“Don’t even finish that question!” Beatrix interrupted loudly, “How the hell do you think I could say I don’t like it? You’re such a fool! You thought of me most of all and you think I wouldn’t *like* it!? Adelbert Steiner, you’re the stupidest man I’ve ever fallen in love with!”

Adelbert opened his mouth, but paused and furrowed his brow in confusion. “Wait, how many ___”

“Yes, well, you’re also the smartest man I’ve ever fallen in love with, okay? I’ll marry the hell out of you, Bert, and you’d better be ready for this damn kid too!”

Simone let out a squeal of delight, jumping up and down on her feet as the two embraced. The ring was forgotten as they kissed tenderly, although it was a little shorter than usual, given he was still in armor and the baby was getting squished. When they pulled apart, Adelbert fumbled with the tiny box until Beatrix rolled her eye and fished it out with her smaller fingers before slipping it on her finger. Of

course it already fit. Adelbert had probably memorized her finger size. She looked at the ring, and a wave of sentimentality washed over her, until she began crying.

Adelbert fidgeted as Beatrix clutched at her eye and rubbed at it. “A-are those good tears? They’re happy ones, right?”

“Of course they are!” she shouted, which made her tears fall faster. “...A little bit! I don’t know...!” She shook her head and admitted, “I just... You’re always so busy. You can barely take time out to visit your *sister*! I’m just... I don’t know if I can live like that. I want to, I do, but *can* I?”

The two Steiners looked at each other; Simone’s face was one of pity for the newly engaged couple, and Adelbert’s one of sudden, horrific realization. If he spent most of his time in the palace, a location where Beatrix would never be allowed to visit... what would become of them and their eventual marriage?

Adelbert considered this fact, his frown creasing deeply. He had always wanted to protect people that could not protect themselves, but how could he do that if he couldn’t protect the happiness of the most important person in the world to him?...The general

closed his eyes in silent resignation, and he looked down at this fiancée. “Bea, I swear to you, I will find a way to make this work. I will have plenty of time to spend with my family, because at the end of the day, I love Alexandria, but I love you and Simmie even more.”

Beatrix was looking at the ring during his entire speech, and something broke the pain and anguish, and her tears poured out fresh, not hot and angry, but cool and refreshing. She trusted him, more than anything, and his words were from his heart; how could she not cry happy tears of joy that she was so loved?

“Damned hysteria!” she shouted at the sky. “I look like a fool!” But she absolutely refused to stop, even while Adelbert held her close and kissed her head.

Queen Garnet took some time to work with Conrad about his new title, and with Victor communicating for the time through a quill and paper, he was able to tell everyone what he expected his new job would entail. It wasn’t much different from before, but now he could choose his employer.

It didn't take a sage to know his heart, as he laid out his sword before Lord King in deference before strapping it back to his side. "*My sword will be yours, for as long as I live.*"

"I could never find a dearer friend than you, Victor," Conrad agreed, his smile brighter than it had been in years as he looked up at his guardian. "I would love nothing more than to have you at my side."

The two shuffled off to speak to each other and set themselves up in the largest guest room, especially after Abigail packed up and left, shouting for Mullenkedheim to carry her bags across the moat to her carriage.

With all of the goings-on around the castle, it was hard for Garnet and Zidane to have a moment's peace between them. Even after Lord King and Victor left the throne room, Elizabeth still wanted to speak to the queen about writing up a proclamation to send with her brother. He was titled now, yes, but still unlearned in the ways of intrigue, and without Garnet's word, there was a chance that the Trenoians wouldn't believe two *men*, especially since one of them was a mute as well.

“I have a wonderful idea!” Garnet said as she and Elizabeth worked their hardest on finding the right words to protect their cousin and brother, respectively, “Why don’t you go with them? You can prove his authority much more than just the written word. You were to take Lady Queen’s place, or at least another great Lord. That way you can stay with him. I know you love him more than anything.”

Elizabeth looked up at her queen, her eyes wide. “Your Majesty, I...”...She couldn’t meet Garnet’s eyes as she carefully considered her words. “...I have someone here, now. I can’t leave. Not forever. I-I can help him there for a while, but I need to return.” The blush on her cheeks was unmistakable. “But I have to come back to Alexandria. Come back home... to Simone.”

Garnet looked at her cousin, her mouth open slightly as the gears began to turn. “...Ah. I see.” There was nothing more to say. “Then I will send a missive to the Steiner household. Just tell me how long you will allow yourself to be away, and I’ll have her know. I won’t let her think you’ve abandoned her for a ‘better’ life.”

Elizabeth couldn’t stop blushing, crossing her arms and returning to her old self. “Ugh, you don’t

have to put it like that. You're making it sound like I can't live without her. I'm not a little girl, lost in romance. What do you think I am, thirteen?"...She stole a glance back at the monarch, and a small smile crept on her lips. "But... thank you for thinking about me, and worrying about Conrad. You're always thinking about everyone else.... That's why I'm worried about you; you never think about yourself."

"That's what she's got me for," Zidane said, sliding up from behind the queen. He looked over the proclamation papers and shrugged. 'Don't gotta understand everything she's doing, but if she has anything she needs to talk about, I'm sure she'll tell me.' He turned to look at Garnet, who glanced back with a loving smile, but behind her smile was a tiredness that Zidane, with his preternatural empathy, couldn't miss. Garnet was about to speak, but her fiance took her sides and kissed her shoulder. "Take your time, but you'll tell me if there's something you need to talk about, right?"

"O-of course, Zidane. I know. We'll talk tonight, I promise." The queen ruffled Zidane's hair when he pulled back, satisfied, and when she looked back at Elizabeth, she shook her head. "As you can see, I'll be fine, Beth. Thanks for worrying."

“Of course. Well, there’s nothing to do but prepare for the trip. I don’t want to admit it, but you’re right: Conrad needs a little assistance. Let me take a moment to consider what I should do for my trip. I’m sure Conrad and I can come up with something tomorrow. I’d consider talking to him tonight, but I want him to be able to iron things out with Victor soon, especially given their communication difficulties.”

Garnet nodded thoughtfully. “Indeed. I’m sure they’ll be fine, but we’d better let them practice a few common phrases together, it’s true.” The queen looked up at her cousin and reached out for a hug. “Have a good night, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Mhm,” Elizabeth replied with a quick squeeze in return, ‘Thank you for everything, Your Majesty.’ She glanced up at Zidane, who was smiling in their direction, and she groaned and rolled her eyes. “And thank you, Monkey-boy, for your assistance as well.”

“You know what, I get that from Steiner too, so I’ll take it,” Zidane replied with a smirk, and Elizabeth and Garnet released each other before setting about their own tasks. When Garnet turned to

her fiancé, however, she sighed and took his hand. “I shouldn’t put this off, I know; Doctor Tot was very emphatic about it as well, but I promise, it’s only until tonight. I have just a little more work to do, so please wait until then.”

Zidane kissed her temple and took a step back. “You do what you need to do, and I’ll wait here; we’ll go to bed together.”

...She knew she shouldn’t feel bad, but those words left her sick to her stomach.

The night that fell over Alexandria was calm and peaceful. General Steiner didn’t return to the castle, but left a missive for Lieutenant General Jasmine to keep things running smoothly, and he spent the night with his new fiancée. Elizabeth poured over some ideas for how she would entreat the people of Treno on behalf of her brother, and how she could help him enough that he wouldn’t need her when she returned to her home. Conrad and Victor spent most of the evening, even all through their dinner, practicing the most useful phrases to communicate in sign language.

Lastly, Garnet finished her work before rising from her throne. She noticed that Zidane brightened at her movement, and she took his hand so they could retire to her bedroom together. She almost hoped that Zidane would make some off color remark or start kissing her all over the moment the door was closed, but instead he moved to lounge on the sofa and listen to her. She opened her mouth and fidgeted, but didn't say much, not until her fiance reached out and pat the seat next to him.

Garnet sighed, her shoulders drooping as she moved to sit next to him and lean on his shoulder. "I know. I know, we need to talk. Did Doctor Tot say anything to you?"

"Nope," Zidane replied, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and squeezing, "I just knew something was up. I told you, you can tell me when you're ready."

"No, you were right before. If there's something I need to talk about, I'll mention it to you. It wouldn't do to have Beth worrying about me not taking care of myself as well." Garnet melted into Zidane's touch, and he kissed her hair in response. Still, despite everything, it took the queen a moment to

gather her wits, and she fidgeted next to her fiancé until:

“Zidane, Doctor Tot thought I was feeling unusual. When I had my checkup, it turns out his findings were correct. Zidane, it’s just that...” She pulled away from the embrace to look him in the eye. “Zidane. I. I’m pregnant.”

...Zidane laughed out loud with such a bark that Garnet raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Oh, that’s a good one!” the genome chuckled when he came down from his laugh, “Nice idea, but we both remember when Doctor Tot said we weren’t compatible. We’re just too different.”

“Yes— well, no,” Garnet began, shaking her head, “I don’t think we fully understood what he meant. I know we both thought it was okay; that’s why I didn’t mind... you know... having sex with you for several nights. But we didn’t listen to Doctor Tot. He said that there was a good chance we wouldn’t have viable offspring.”

“Yeah, which means—”

“Which *means*, that *we* might be able to have children, but any children we have can’t have children of their *own*. You remember what he said,

yes? That a horse and a donkey can have a mule, but the mule can't have children? Well *this*." She gestured to her stomach. "Is our mule."

Zidane's smile slowly fell as he began to consider that Garnet might have been telling the truth, instead of making a joke. Garnet trembled a bit as he placed a hand on his chin, thinking about what this might truly mean for the two of them, and she shook her head. "I-I just... I hadn't even considered that this might... I hadn't realized what Doctor Tot was trying to say, and..."

"So let's see," Zidane muttered, not necessarily cutting off Garnet, but trying to piece together why she was so scared, "You would be ecstatic, I think, if there was no 'incompatibility' between us, and this was a normal baby. So that means that you're worried *about* our incompatibility. Which means that..."

Garnet played with the fingers in her lap, and she sighed softly. "If this child becomes my heir and inherits the throne, then there is a chance that he or she won't be able to conceive and continue our line. We never even considered how our frivolous actions might affect people."

Zidane took her hands and kissed her knuckles, and the queen felt calmed just by his gentle touch. She hiccuped as he massaged her hands and spoke, “Dagger, listen to me. First of all, we don’t know that this little one isn’t able to have children. Second, you weren’t related to Queen Brahne; when the people found out, they still chose you over the countess. If that happens, your— *our* child can adopt too. Third, we’re not sure what Conrad will decide to do as King in Treno; there’s still a chance that he can have children of his own. It can be like Lindblum and Gordon, before Eiko was adopted. Hell, we can talk to Mikoto and see what she thinks about it; of all the people on Gaia at this point, she is the only one who knows anything about what Garland had been working on when he made the Genomes. She might know something that can help the baby out. There’s tons of things that we can do, that *they* can do when they grow up. You don’t need to worry about something as simple as them being unable to have kids.”

The queen mulled it over in her mind quietly. “I know that, I suppose...” Garnet admitted, looking at their hands as they pressed together, “I just... We should have been more careful. We should have thought about the consequences.”

“And we are,” the genome said solemnly, ‘We won’t let the next generation be trapped. We’ll do whatever we can to help them, and we’ll work it out *together*, okay?’ Zidane said sternly, reaching out to take his fiancée’s head and kiss her temple. “I promise you, it’s going to work out.”

...Garnet began sniffing, but not from fear. This time, they were tears of joy, and she wrapped her arms around Zidane in one of her life-line hugs, like he was the last person on the planet. “Zidane, oh Zidane, I—”

“Heyyyy, it’s okay, it’s okay. I love you too.” Because he knew that’s what she was trying to say through her tears. The two clutched each other tighter, and Zidane chuckled incredulously. “Congratulations, Your Majesty. You’re going to be a mother....I’m going to be a father...” Zidane paused when reality hit him again. “I’m going to be a father...!”

“The best!” Garnet agreed, squeezing him tight and kissing his jaw, “You’ll be the best father in the world!”

“Even better than yours?” Zidane asked, pulling back only so he could grin impishly at his fiancée.

...Garnet matched his smile and leaned forward to kiss him softly on the lips. "...Alright then, *second best*."

Zidane could live with that.

25. Dilemma Solved

Alexandria Castle was still abuzz with the wedding preparations, but with all of the worry about the pregnancy gone out the window, Garnet felt a sudden sense of calm and peace, so much so that the entire castle seemed to move at a crawl. She had Zidane at her side, and a child she could love, just like her mother before her. The world was turning, and she — despite her status — was bringing a new life into the world, just like any human being in the world. It was extremely humbling, and for a moment, she wondered if she should step down from her post and run away with Zidane to the countryside, as she felt much like she was just a farmwife, soon to be fat with child like any peasant girl.

She passed by Elizabeth on the way to breakfast, and the faraway look in her eye made her cousin realize she was lost in her thoughts. “I take it you spoke to Zidane then?”

“Oh. Oh, yes, I did,” Garnet conceded as they walked down the stairway together towards the dining room. “...Beth, do you ever wonder what it

would be like if you weren't, well, a princess? If your mother wasn't a countess, and you lived a normal life in another land?"

Elizabeth pursed her lips, but it slowly curled into a frown. "No, not really. I was too busy learning as much as I could every day, and by the time I didn't need to study anymore... well, flights of fancy were the furthest thing from my mind."

"I was just thinking of my old home, when I was young. When the Huge Eye fell upon Madain Sari....If my first mother and I hadn't taken that boat, I'd never have arrived here....If Garland hadn't killed my people, I would have been living there still, never any the wiser. I would have been a common girl." She wondered if she'd be pregnant at this time as well; she didn't know how early Summoner Tribe girls were married, and she truly doubted Eiko knew much about that, given that she wanted to start dating at six.

Elizabeth went quiet, and she reached out to place a hand on her arm. "Please don't say that, Cousin. If you lived there, then I never would have met you. Sure, I might have been queen after Mother as a result... but then I wouldn't have met Simone; I'd have to marry someone I didn't love... I'd rather

be a common girl now than lose out on meeting you and Simmie.”

Garnet sighed securely in the knowledge that she wouldn't have wanted any other person to father her child, either. It was no use wondering about how the past could have been different, anyway. “You're right, Beth. I shouldn't be worried about the what-ifs. This is the only life we have, and we should live it without any regrets.” She winked lightly, a smile on her face. “It's nice to fantasize though. What if you met Simmie on the farm, and what if Zidane were a summoner boy too?”

Elizabeth groaned and rolled her eyes good-naturedly as the two arrived in the dining room. There they found Victor and Conrad already partaking their breakfast whilst teaching and learning sign language, respectively. The new King was even being asked to write the words he didn't understand on a sheet of paper, as if he himself could not speak.

“You'll learn more intricate signs after you learn the most necessary ones,” Victor signed after reading the newest sentence Conrad wrote. The young man only understood a few of the words that were so smoothly said, and he sighed.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get this right,” he muttered. Victor raised an eyebrow with a soft smile, and Conrad rolled his eyes in reply. “*It’s hard.*” he explained, feeling like a child who couldn’t express himself properly.

Victor’s smile brightened and he lifted his hands. “*Everything worth learning is.*”

“Good morning, King, Victor!” Garnet called, moving to sit across from the two of them and smiling, “Oh, should I sign?”

Victor smiled in reply, and Conrad showed how to do so, which Garnet copied as best she was able. Elizabeth managed to follow suit as she sat down next to the queen and breakfast-talk began in earnest about the trip to Treno. “I do hope you’ll be ready to return in time for the wedding. We’ll miss you so if you cannot come. And Simmie will miss you too!”

“Cousin, *please*, can we focus on King’s estate right now?” Elizabeth groaned, which caused Conrad to cock an eyebrow.

...He suddenly brightened when he realized what she was implying. “You found someone, Beth? Really? Someone else!?”

“By Ifrit, shut up, you dork!” Elizabeth hissed, her blush creeping up her cheeks despite her attempt to hide it, “It’s not a big deal, jeez!”

Conrad giggled like a maniac, feeling like he was let in on a secret of the highest importance, and immediately began to ask Victor how to sign how a sister’s girlfriend was doing.

Elizabeth groaned and shook her head, but the smile on her face was almost as lighthearted as Garnet’s. The queen was happy that things were looking up, but something felt off. She considered a moment as she stood up. She could hear the clanking of the general, who was passing by the kitchen with a thoughtful expression on his face. He wasn’t there to give a report that morning as well, and she had heard around the castle that Lieutenant General Jasmine was getting annoyed at his lazy attitude. The queen excused herself, asking the family to spend some time together, and she lifted her dress so she could jog after her general. “General Steiner!” she called, which made the knight turn in surprise. She waved him down as she descended the stairs after him. “How have you been? How has Beatrix been doing?”

Steiner stiffened, and Garnet realized that something was wrong. “Ah, Your Majesty. I’m glad that you’re worried about your subjects, but you needn’t...” He paused when Garnet looked at him with her big, bright, pleading eyes. He took a deep breath and clutched at his forehead. “You needn’t give me the eyes you gave me as a teenager, Your Majesty.”

“I still technically am one, at least until my next birthday,” Garnet pointed out, which made Steiner groan at the thought.

“You’ve certainly matured past your naivety, at least.” The two stood in the grand foyer of the castle for a moment, and finally the general nodded. “... There is something I need to speak to you about. I have a feeling we will need Lieutenant General Jasmine as well, however.”

Garnet cocked an eyebrow, but she nodded. “I’m free for a few hours, or I *can* be. Summon her for me, and the three of us shall meet in the throne room.”

Steiner saluted his queen and clanked off, as Garnet tapped her chin and turned towards her throne room....When she passed back by the kitchen, however, the smells that Quina’s cooking

were making made her stomach growl louder than she had ever heard it before, even on her adventures, when hunger was a normal worry....Maybe a few crumpets, ketchup, and mint tea wouldn't be so bad before speaking with Steiner...

Lieutenant General Jasmine wasn't happy that the first time she saw Steiner that day was him telling her that Queen Garnet wanted to speak with them. "It feels more like Her Majesty would want to talk with *you* instead. I've been picking up all your slack, and the wedding is coming up soon. At this point, I'm basically the general at this point!"

Steiner winced under her words, but he admitted his fault and responded truthfully, "My apologies. To be honest, I had asked Queen Garnet to speak with us in regards to that. You're right, I've been... preoccupied, and I know that it's no excuse, which is why I wish to speak to Her Majesty alongside you."

Jasmine crossed her arms as they walked down the hallway. "Well, thank you for admitting to it, though that doesn't really make all the work I put in any better. I can't wait to hear what punishment Queen Garnet has for you. Though, to be honest,

with how much she looks up to you, I doubt she'd even give you a slap on the wrist."

"Clearly, you've never seen the way she glares me down when I disagree with her," Steiner said. He clanked in 'silence' for a moment, before he furrowed his brow in confusion. "...You think she looks up to me?"

Jasmine glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and blew a raspberry. "Psh, please, have you not seen the way she looks at you? You're like her second father. Small wonder she chose you to be the general, despite the obvious fact that you never had what it took to actually lead."

Steiner didn't bother replying to that, and the two entered the throne room quietly, where they found Queen Garnet settled on the throne next to Doctor Tot and speaking to Zidane. The general and lieutenant general both saluted her when she looked up and smiled at them. "There you are! I hear you needed to speak with me."

"Indeed, and I suppose it would be best if Zidane were here as well," Steiner admitted, which prompted the genome to cock a smile and swish his tail, "It's... It's about Beatrix, Your Majesty. She has

been... unsure how this arrangement can work, since I've been so busy."

Jasmine scoffed. "'Busy', he says."

Steiner continued unabated, "And I remembered something I told Zidane, on the deck of the Invincible, before we arrived in Memoria. I had said that I was considering relinquishing my knighthood many times after Alexandria was destroyed..." Zidane let out a soft gasp; he clearly remembered it, the way he had remembered everything his friends had told him in confidence, "But I decided against it, because there were still things I needed to protect. To be a knight is not only to protect one's queen, or even a king, but to protect the people of the world; anyone who needs that protection the most, at any given time."

There was silence in the room; not even Jasmine felt the need to scoff as Steiner continued. "But, after all these years, something changed. I have seen my sister beg me for more time with my family. Beatrix became a pariah, and we couldn't spend any time together. My entire life has become the castle, as it was before, but even moreso since my promotion." He let out a sigh, belabored and pained, and he pressed his knuckles to his chin. "...Beatrix

was crying, last night. Before and after I proposed to her.”

Garnet’s and Zidane’s eyes shot up, and Jasmine’s own went wide, but he continued quickly, before he could be interrupted. “She was afraid that nothing would change; that even after marriage, she would be alone. With only her to take care of our child. It was then that I realized. How can I protect the people of the world if I can’t even protect the happiness of the people I love most?”

Steiner went silent for a moment, but Garnet already had an idea of where this was going. Her assumption seemed right on the money when the general’s hands went to Save the Queen at his side, and he pulled it off of his hip. “Which is why, I regret to inform you, Your Majesty, that I must do what I had been thinking of doing those years ago. I am standing down. I cannot continue my knighthood. Not like this.”

Garnet uncrossed her legs and leaned forward, and Zidane stood next to her, unmoving. Even Doctor Tot seemed incredulous. Jasmine took a step back, her mouth open as Steiner turned to her, Save the Queen in hand. “While I know that this is, ultimately, Queen Garnet’s decision, I have seen the

way you work, Lieutenant General Jasmine, and I would be honored if you could take my place as General of Alexandria.”

Jasmine’s jaw dropped. Her eyes darted to Garnet’s, and back to Save the Queen, before turning back to the queen with wide eyes. “I don’t. I can’t. Not without Her Majesty’s express... You *proposed!*? No one knew about this, you can’t just—what about all of her admirers!? How infuriating, you can’t just—”

“I think it’s great!” Zidane called from the throne, much to Steiner’s chagrin (of course *he* would think it’s great, he practically demanded it happen!) ‘Beatrix needed a little bit of assurance that she was still at the forefront of Steiner’s mind. The two of you are made for each other, that much is certain.’ That said, however, the genome then took a more somber tone. “...but you’re having trouble balancing the two worlds you live in, is that it?”

Steiner nodded and added: “And I understand that I have sworn fealty to Alexandria, and thus cannot simply renounce my title, but I am certain that Queen Garnet, in her boundless wisdom, will understand that if she ever had need of me, I would

be available to protect the people of Alexandria. I just... cannot do it wholly and completely, you see.”

Garnet was quiet, and the look in her eyes was pained, but ultimately understanding. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them again. “I understand, Steiner, and I would never ask you to continue something that you cannot, in good conscience, do. We all love Beatrix as well, and we want nothing but her happiness and yours. You may stand down; I give you leave to go home to your family, to start a family of your own. You have spent most of your adult life devoting yourself to *my* family. I would be happy to know that you are devoting your life to *your* family now.” She nodded at Steiner before standing and stepping down to him. She extended her hands and took Save the Queen from his own before turning to Jasmine. “And I was wrong, it’s true. I let my feelings for us as adventurers override the fact that you have never been a leader, Steiner. Lieutenant General Jasmine, on the other hand, has been working hard, and has stepped up to her role beautifully. She leads as if she were born to do so, and I would be honored if you were to wield Save the Queen as General of Alexandria.”

Jasmine's jaw hadn't moved since it dropped, and she stared at the beautiful sheath and sword, before she looked up at the queen. She finally found her voice after she swallowed to rewet her throat: "Your Majesty, this... I cannot even begin to thank you for the faith you put in me. I do not deserve your kindness, and I will do my utmost to see that your belief in me is not misplaced."

"You should thank Zidane as well," Garnet said, placing Save the Queen — which was large enough that it couldn't even fit in Jasmine's hands and had to be placed across her arms — into the woman's care. She pet the sheath before releasing it into her guard's hands. "He was the one who told me about you. I daresay I never would have suspected how well you would fit in this role."

Jasmine's bright, incredulous smile turned sour, and her frown creased so deeply that she looked like Steiner had whenever Zidane was mentioned, back at the beginning of their adventures. Zidane and Steiner glanced at each other, and the two of them burst into laughter. The new general gave a loud, ugly sounding groan before she roared, "I get it, you two don't have to laugh! By Ramuh, the best thing about this turn of events is now I don't have to answer to a buffoon like Adelbert Steiner!"

“Indeed,” Steiner replied, placing his hands behind his back, “I daresay that Her Majesty only needs to have to worry about *one* total buffoon in a leadership position anymore, now that you’re the only one who will answer to her.”

Jasmine clenched her fists under the sword that still lay across her arms, and Zidane continued to laugh uproariously. “Ow, ow, my sides! Steiner, my man, I didn’t know you could dish it as well as take it!”

“Of course, Zidane,” the former general began, glancing up at the genome clutching his sides, “I learned from the best, after all.”

26. Mighty Protector

It was getting closer and closer to the royal wedding, and the closer it got, the more Zidane was dragged everywhere so he could be taught on the proper protocol for the marriage. The rehearsing was enough to drive him nuts, and he just wanted to rip off his fancy schmancy tuxedo, smear his makeup on the ring bearer's cushion, and charge out of the cathedral with a howl. But instead, he was sitting around, waiting for the "proper" moment to begin his walk down the aisle, where the queen awaited him, for the queen was a rock for Alexandria, and thus never moved for anyone. It was he who had to move to her side.

Zidane *might* have been annoyed at the whole procedure, but Garnet was going to be wearing basically fifty pounds of wedding dress, and she probably shouldn't be dragging that train everywhere anyway. He wouldn't mind letting her stay at the altar and going to meet with her. At least *he* wasn't wearing the dress.

He wouldn't *mind* it, but they were at this for several hours, and he kept "messing it up",

apparently. “Look, I don’t have to wait until the seventy-fourth beat to start, why can’t I just start when I want? It wasn’t even a—”

“Now now,” Doctor Tot called from the altar, having stood in for Garnet when she had to excuse herself to run the country, “The seventy-fourth beat is when the music builds to a crescendo, thus signifying the birth of the nation, or in this case, the *rebirth*. Prince Consort Nathan learned everything down to a tee. If he could manage it, I’m sure you could find a way to...”

“Don’t bring Nathan into this!” Zidane shouted back, finally losing his cool, “I know what you’re trying to do, and it probably will work, but I wish it wouldn’t!!”

Doctor Tot was about to reply, but at that moment, the doors to the cathedral burst open, and the attendants cried out when Weimar rushed into the building. “Zidane! Zidane, yooooo!”

“Weimar! What’s going on, where’s the fire?” Zidane asked as the Pluto Knight skidded to a halt next to the genome.

“It’s Beatrix!” Weimar announced, and Zidane halted. “It’s time, Miss Simone went to get the

midwife, and I went to find someone to keep the Captain—the General— Mr. Steiner company so he doesn't blow a gasket worrying!"

Zidane was already removing his suit-jacket, which caused the attendants to cry out as he tossed it into one of their arms, "Alright. I needed a reason to leave anyway."

"Master— Z-Zidane, you can't just leave during the rehearsal...!" the attendant cried, "You might get your suit dirty!"

"Yeah, I know," Zidane agreed, unbuttoning his shirt and kicking off his shoes. Everyone screamed and one of the women covered her eyes, her cheeks red. "Weimar, my outfit is in the back room — over that way — go grab my clothes, won't you?"

The Pluto Knight saluted him and was off as Zidane fumbled with his pants. The attendants continued to shout even as they folded up his wedding suit, and Doctor Tot waddled up to the genome. "You know, I always wondered if it took a while to take your clothes off with your tail. Most tailed creatures prefer skirts."

"Oh, I've had tons of practice, but Dagger definitely gets her clothes on faster than me," Zidane

admitted, not at all embarrassed by the subject matter, even when he was in nothing but his boxers. By this point, all of the women had rushed from the room, too afraid of their queen's wrath if she learned that one of them had watched of their own volition. Weimar returned, and Zidane immediately grabbed the pants, jumped into them (quite literally), and snatched his vest next. "See you around, Tot!"

"Have a good day, Zidane, and tell Master Steiner that everyone in the castle is praying for his family's happiness." The good doctor gave a wave as Zidane slid on his vest and tore out of the cathedral, leaving Weimar holding his shoes.

The Pluto Knight stood for a moment, waiting for Zidane to take the shoes, but when the genome rushed off, he sputtered afterwards. "Zidane, wait! You forgot something!" Weimar called, jogging out after the genome with shoes in hand.

Adelbert Steiner wasn't sure he would ever be able to get used to a civilian's life again. He had been a soldier for most of his adult life, and he had gone through nearly the entirety of it thinking that he would be unable to step down. He made a

promise; he swore fealty to Queen Brahne and her family for as long as he breathed, and to abandon his duties for the sake of his family was anathema to him. He didn't deserve the kindness granted to him by his queen, but he, in his weakness, refused to return to Queen Garnet's side. He would be a husband — and a father — soon, and he knew that he could never call himself a defender of the people if he couldn't even defend the happiness of those he loved.

...It was only a few days after returning to his family home that he began to realize Beatrix's pain. He was already unsure just what to do with himself, now that he wasn't supposed to wake up hours before daybreak in order to get his soldiers doing their warm-ups. He tried to help Simone with the shop, but sitting around waiting for old ladies to come in to buy necessities wasn't enough to ease his antsiness. He could go to market to buy the toiletries they usually sold, but that only alleviated the problem for a moment. He could print up fliers or busk a bit, but speaking to people was never his strong suit.

Adelbert and Beatrix were sitting on the first floor together, trying desperately not to growl in frustration and boredom, and finally the pariah

spoke up. “We need to do *something* to fix this. Look, I know you’re not as good with numbers, but at least I can handle a little bookkeeping. I had to do it for years when managing my soldiers. All we really have to do is find something else that we can sell alongside our necessities, and then we’ll finally be able to get something *done* properly.”

Steiner grumbled as he stared at the register on the counter. “What in the world could you or I provide? We’ve spent our whole lives *killing* people, Bea. We’re not... we don’t *make* things, we *destroy* them.”

“Well, if there’s one thing I’ve learned, living with your sister for the past few months, is that as long as you’re still around, you can learn something new. We just have to decide *what* we need to do.” Beatrix looked up at her fiance quizzically, a thoughtful glance that caused him to cock his head expectantly. “I remember hearing that your mother was killed during the initial attack by the Burmecians. If your father raised you by running this shop, then who did the household chores?”

Adelbert stiffened at the thought; fleeting memories of a mother whose face he could barely even remember flashed through his head, much like

the brave knight who saved him during the initial attack on Alexandria, and eventually inspired him to join the knighthood. Eventually, however, he leaned on the counter and shook his head in thought. “I don’t know where you’re going with this, but Simmie and I had to keep the house running while Father ran the store out here. Simmie was always the one who did the household chores, cleaning and whatnot. I usually did most of the menial labor, cutting wood and being sent out for groceries, what have you.”

“And who made the food once the groceries were bought?” Beatrix continued, urging him to continue. Adelbert cocked an eyebrow, and she raised a hand, twirling it in front of her as if to tell him to speed up, “Simmie said she was the one who usually made the stews and things, but you...”

“Oh, right. I tended to work with the stove out back, before we had one inside the house,” Adelbert admitted, shrugging. “I usually had to make the bread and honey cakes for dinner and dessert, or else we’d have nothing but watery soup.”

Beatrix jumped up quickly enough that her fiance cried out in horror (“Careful! You mustn’t exert

yourself so much!”), “Exactly! You baked, Bert! That’s something we can do: we’ll start a bakery!”

...Adelbert stared at her, the color draining from his face. “Make-make a... cakes and breads? That’s — I haven’t done that in *years*! I couldn’t possibly —”

“Well, we wouldn’t do it *now*, obviously!” Beatrix said, getting more excited by the thought, ‘You’d have to practice again, but Simmie said you made the most delicious cakes when you were growing up; you’d need some more practice, but just think about it! We could have a family business, we could... we could be... we could be a *respectable* family! A family whose name would be spoken not in hushed and feared whispers, but something well loved by the locals, something that our child can grow and be proud of where they come from.’ She paused when she saw her fiance’s wide eyes as he stared at the floor in bewilderment. “Bert, Bert, are you even listening, Bert!?”

Adelbert’s eyes widened. “Water.”

“What in the world are you talking about!?” Beatrix shouted, her excitement causing her to yell.

Adelbert's voice rose to a horrified wail as he slid back his chair and gestured wildly. "You broke your water!"

Adelbert had wandered through Pandaemonium itself, fighting Malboros and monsters of all sorts, and it didn't even *compare* to the pandaemonium that erupted in the house that day. The two began screaming at each other until Simone came barreling down the stairs. "What's going on!?"

The couple screamed at their roommate, who screamed back at them. "What do I do what do we do!?" the younger Steiner cried, literally, as tears began falling down her cheeks.

Beatrix grabbed onto Adelbert's shoulder and turned to nod at Simone. "Get the midwife! Midwife! You know where she lives!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhokayahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" and Simone tore out of the house, still screaming.

Beatrix had finally begun hyperventilating instead of just screeching, and Adelbert began wracking his brain for what he had been told they needed. Water, linens, right right right. "Forgive me, Bea," he began, taking his fiancée's waist and lifting

her up into his arms, “Let’s get you to the second floor.”

“I can— I can still walk!” Beatrix insisted, though she wrapped an arm around Adelbert’s neck and took a deep breath before grunting loudly through a contraction. “Auuugh, okay! I’m okay! It doesn’t hurt much!...Not as much as when I lost my eye, at least!”

“Deep breaths, Bea. In and out, like you practiced,” Adelbert insisted, and Beatrix nodded, her breathing finally evening out as her fiance climbed the stairs. He left her sitting on the bed in their bedroom before placing his forehead against hers, “I’ll go get some linens; we want to keep things as clean as possible. Can you wait just a moment?”

“You needn’t treat me like I’m a wilting flow— auuugh!” Another contraction, and she grabbed Adelbert’s bicep for support as she roared. “Just... just go! I’m fine! Augh!!”

Adelbert kissed her temple and moved to work when she released him, and the man worked around the house to prepare some of the items that the midwife had mentioned beforehand.

...and speaking of: “Bert! Bert, she’s here!” Simone shouted from the entrance as Adelbert scrambled on the second floor, “I ran into one of the Pluto Knights on the way here; I didn’t know what to say, so I asked him to find Zidane.”

Her brother let out a belabored sigh. “Wonderful,” he grumbled as the aging midwife began walking up the stairs, “My lady, thank you for your assistance. She’s in the room to the left.”

“I know, I know!” the midwife huffed, slapping Adelbert’s hand away with her own, “You think I haven’t been here before? How were we to know if the child is healthy? If Beatrix was eating enough?” She huffed loudly again and strode off, leaving Adelbert blinking as Simone joined him.

“Don’t worry, she really *is* the best in Alexandria. Or at least the best one in walking distance,” she said, reaching up to rub her brother’s arm, “Don’t worry, Bert. Trixie’s going to be fine, I just know it.”

Adelbert sighed, but his smile towards his sister was genuine as he handed the linens off to his sister and moved to collect some more water. Everything would be fine. Beatrix was strong; she was the best Holy Knight in the world—

“Arrrrgh!!” A scream from the second floor, and Adelbert clutched at the doorway outside and grabbed his mouth. His stomach was flipping, and he felt like he would throw up today’s lunch. He felt that there was nothing he could do; if only he had been any good at casting magic, he would have learned how to ease her pain. He only hoped that Beatrix would be able to concentrate enough to keep herself healed...

It was around the time that he was returning with a pail of water from the nearest well that he saw a familiar figure jogging up the road. “Yoooo, Steiner!” Zidane called, waving frantically as he approached.

“Where in the world are you shoes!?” Adelbert shouted, shaking his head at the genome’s feet.

Zidane blinked and glanced down at his dirt encrusted feet. “...You know what, I honestly don’t really know.” He shrugged and took the bucket from his friend, “No, no, don’t say anything, just relax, relax! I’ll help too. How are you holding up?”

Adelbert bit his knuckle in a desperate attempt to hide the anxious wail that erupted from his throat.

He failed regardless. “I-I’m fine,” he grumbled around the knuckle.

“Like hell you are,” Zidane said matter-of-factly, “Let’s go heat this, okay?”

Adelbert grumbled as his friend walked into the house, but halted following Zidane when he saw Weimar rushing from where Zidane approached from. “Capta— Mister Steiner!” the Pluto Knight called, pausing mid-salute before showing Zidane’s shoes. “Mister Zidane forgot these!”

Adelbert sighed and he covered his mouth. It was to hide the smile that appeared, knowing that the reason Zidane forgot them was out of worry for his friends. “Thanks, I’ll give him them.” He took them, and Weimar smiled brightly, until... “Well!? Do you need to hang around all the time!? Don’t you have a patrol to do!? Hurry up and go on!” The Pluto Knight screeched and rushed off with an apology, and the elder Steiner let out a sigh. Gods, it felt good to yell at someone sometimes... He kind of missed it.

With Zidane and Simone helping gather anything that was needed, Adelbert was allowed to enter the

bedroom where Beatrix lay. The only rule was that he not panic, which was easier said than done, but Steiner had faced the Demon Tranced Kuja, as well as Necron, Lord of Death, himself. Compared to that, helping his wife deliver their child was... well, child's play.

...Adelbert kicked himself for that terrible analogy.

The breathing exercises that Beatrix had practiced over the months, as well as a strong, firm hand to grasp onto during her pushes, assisted in keeping the woman grounded during her contractions. Adelbert had heard that women had been known to break their lover's hand during such an ordeal, and given Beatrix's strength, he was certain he'd need a Cura after this, but the pain was nothing, and he did his best to match her own breathing as he kissed her temple and whispered words of encouragement.

Beatrix didn't say much, but when the midwife announced that the head was cresting, and Simone, who had brought in some heated water and collected some of the newly-soiled linens, began sobbing with joy, the mother's eyes shone with such delight that

Adelbert couldn't help but bite his lip and feel his own tears begin.

He opened his mouth, gaping wide, as the midwife crowed in triumph and grabbed one of the fresher linens. "Congratulations, Beatrix. He's a boy."

A boy! Adelbert slumped forward, unsure of what to say or do. Beatrix released him to take hold of the red, wrinkled child who was screaming in rage and indignation at the trial he was sent through. She stared, as dumbfounded as her fiancé, until she began chuckling. "A boy." She said, turning to him. "Bert. Bert, it's a boy! He'll look just like you!"

That's what I'm afraid of. Adelbert thought to himself before turning back to his family. The midwife and Simone were forgotten as they helped clean up the room, and the two—no, three spent some time together, for the first time in all of their lives, they were finally all together.

The baby absolutely refused to quiet, even after several minutes. "I should have known he'd get your lungs," Beatrix joked, for it was the only way to keep from getting exasperated, "He's a Steiner, alright."

Adelbert reached out and placed his large hand on the child's head. He could easily palm the entire head without a problem, and he sighed gratefully. "Alexander be praised, he has your eyes."

"Yours are fine."

"They're too small."

"Says you."

"Heavens take me!" The midwife shouted as she reentered the room, "Can't you see he's hungry? Give him something to eat; he's given everything to get out of there!"

Beatrix and Adelbert looked at each other, and the two chuckled incredulously.

Beatrix had been fighting for hours to keep from crying as the boy nursed for the first time in his life. It was incredible, seeing the tiny creature, a little bit her, a little bit him, voraciously devouring his first meal. Everything seemed to change at that moment; she knew, instantly, that she was a mother. It hadn't truly sunk in until the moment that the two of them were reunited, but now she could look at Adelbert with bright, wet eyes. "I'm a mother," she said, as if

she couldn't believe it, and she needed someone to agree.

"...I'm a father," he admitted in reply, placing his other hand on her own head and curling protectively over the two of them. "This is... more than I could have ever hoped for."

"He'll grow up to be strong and brave, just like you."

"He'll grow up to have a will of iron, always seeking out true justice, just like you."

The two watched over the boy gently, up until the child, drunk on milk, emptied his bladder for the first time (By the gods, why is it *black!*?) and, once his linens were changed and he was properly cleaned, he settled in for a quick nap. "Until he wants more milk," Adelbert noted.

"Indubitably," Beatrix agreed, kissing the baby on the forehead.

The two were preparing for some peace and quiet, but they didn't get it as Zidane practically burst the door down and slid in. "Yo guys, what's goin—" He halted the moment Beatrix shot him a look, and for once in his life, the Genome *shut up*.

‘Oh, right,’ he whispered as Simone snuck into the room behind him. “What’s going onnnnn?”

“He’s *adorable*...” Simone cooed, leaning at the foot of the bed and sniffing. “Oh man, I’m an auntie! I hope I’m a better auntie than Beth’s mom!”

“Most assuredly,” Adelbert said quietly, a laugh in his belly as he spoke.

“Soooooooooooooooo...” Zidane muttered, sitting cross-legged on the floor, “...What’s his name?”

Adelbert’s blood froze, and Beatrix smiled. “I don’t think Bert thought that far ahead.”

“You didn’t even think of your kid’s name?” Zidane asked, a joking snicker coming to his voice, “Like, isn’t that the first thing you think of when this sort of thing happens?”

“I thought of one!” Adelbert shouted (which got him an elbow to the gut that took the wind out of his lungs). Luckily, the boy didn’t awaken, and he grumbled as he continued, “It just... I thought of *one*. For a girl....This isn’t a girl.”

Zidane cocked an eyebrow, and his friend sighed, “I was... hoping... if I didn’t think that he would be a boy, that he wouldn’t be one. Alexandrian boys

are... well. You know how *you're* treated in the castle, as well as the Pluto Knights..."

Ah. So this kid's gunna grow up to be nothing more than a pawn for marriage, much like Conrad was supposed to be. "You didn't turn out that way."

"Yes well, I had to *work* for it," Adelbert grumbled, rubbing at his head, "Forgive me if I hoped my firstborn wouldn't have to worry about his gender growing up....Bah, it matters little. He's a boy and that's that."

"We could give him a girl's name," Beatrix said conspiratorially, "Raise him as a girl."

Adelbert's deadpan was glorious, as it was only because he was holding back a scream, "Absolutely not. I won't hide who he is from the world."

"If I may make a suggestion," Beatrix began as she rocked the baby back and forth... 'There's a name I was thinking of.' The whole of the room waited expectantly, with baited breath, and the pariah smiled gently. "When you and the others went into Memoria. When I saw the *Invincible* pass into the portal, there was no certainty that you would return. I prayed to Alexander the entire time you were in there, hoping to the gods that you would be

spared. And they saw fit to return you to me. And do you know what had been torn to pieces, broken and sundered?”

Zidane chuckled, “Our bodies?” he joked.

“You’d think that,” Beatrix hummed in reply, a smile on her lips, “but compared to your armor, the entirety of the group was right as rain. Adelbert, your armor saved you in there, make no mistake. It was a powerful shield and protector during your fight, and without it, I don’t think you would have survived. Adelbert, it took months for the Genomes to manage to reforge your Maximilian Armor, but I have never been more thankful for a piece of metal before, except, perhaps, for Save the Queen.”

Simone’s mouth hung open, agape, the way her brother’s did at that very moment. “So, are you saying...!?”

“Why not?” Beatrix asked as she looked down at the sleeping babe, “I wish only that he be a protector of those he loves, whether it be his family, his home, or his country. I think Maximilian is a perfect name for him.”

Adelbert held his chin in thought as he considered it, but the decision had, really, already

been made. “It’s perfect,” he agreed, looking down over the sleeping boy in his fiancée’s arms. “Maximilian, my mighty defender.”

Maximilian cooed quietly in his sleep, blissfully unaware as his family silently swore to protect him until he was old enough to live up to his namesake.

27. Prince Consort (Redux)

The entirety of Alexandria was awash with fervent joy. The children were playing in the streets, and entire families took the week off to prepare feasts in celebration. Their queen was to be married, and with it, the prospect of an heir. Alexandria's future was bright, and its people could not be happier.

Freya Crescent walked across the plaza with Fratley at her side. It was a welcome respite from chasing down Prince Puck and praying to Reis that he would be willing to learn the ways of politics in time to take the throne. Several young children rushed past her, giggling and counting the coins that their parents had given to them, as the squares were covered with open-air stalls selling treats, confetti, and trinkets.

"It is nice to see the world is healing," Fratley mused quietly, "I hope we will have rebuilt enough to be this raucous when King Puck is wedded."

Freya highly doubted that would happen anytime soon. She was a little worried that they would have bastard princes before they had an actual queen,

with the way Puck refused to accept even simple Burmecian traditions. Still... “Indeed. It is a delight that we have rebuilt so much and so quickly. It is a wonder we even fought in the first place, given that we can achieve so much more together.”

“The Mist ruined many lives, but I’m sure we’ll find a way to move on,” Fratley tapped his snout with a claw as he racked his brain to remember... “What was her name, the Cleyran Dancer. Rayne? She went to live in Zamo Basin and help the forest heal from the logging efforts. If the people can regrow and repair the forest as quickly as they gather lumber, I’m sure things will go even quicker.”

If more of that could happen, Alexandrians and Cleyrans, Burmecians and Lindbulmians, all working together without the Mist to dredge up rage and anger... then the world would be a better place, and perhaps the rest of the world could be explored, colonized, and visited. The Forgotten Continent would be home to new kingdoms in the far flung future, and the world would be...

Freya’s thoughts were interrupted when she heard a joyous shriek, and she looked up just in time to see Eiko, coming from the gates of the castle with her parents on her heels. She waved down the dragon

knight and leapt into the Burmecian's arms. "Freya!" the summoner shouted happily. 'How have you been? How long did it take you to get here? Did you fly on an airship?' She gasped loudly, "Did you *jump* the whole way here!?"

"Not in one jump, no," Freya said with a smile, holding her friend tight and approaching the regent and his wife, 'but Fratley and I did walk most of the way. I was expecting to strike down any monsters on the paths, but there have been less and less along the way recently. I'm quite surprised that there are so many caravans that are able to go through the ancient pathways of yore.' She then curtsied before Cid and placed his daughter on the cobblestones. "It is wonderful to see you and yours again, Regent."

"No no, Lady Freya, the pleasure is all ours, I'm sure," Cid replied, his mustache twitching with a smile, "To you and to Lord Fratley. Has the iron and steel made it to Burmecia well? I'm so sorry that we could only offer a single steam ship to deliver things for now."

"Think nothing of it; it is arriving faster than the caravans of wood from Zamo Basin, that much is certain. Prince Puck has been considering ways that we could thank you properly. We already have a

Cleyran Geomancer working hard in Zamo Basin, but I'm afraid we cannot find a way to assist you in your mining operations."

Cid chuckled out loud as Eiko skipped off to go find some sweets, as the conversation was getting boring, "Nay, think nothing of it. The fact that you have been training Gordon in the ways of the spear is enough, although perhaps we could do with a few more trainers for our footsoldiers, if you think Burmecia can spare any."

"How is Gordon faring, by the way? He understands the forms and stances well enough, but lacks the confidence and bravery to soar the skies. Is there something going on outside of the training grounds?"

...The two continued speaking to each other about trivialities as the party began walking towards the Grand Cathedral of Alexandria, while Hilda spent a little extra time corralling her daughter to follow behind. "Mama! Can't I have something now? I'll finish it before the ceremony!"

"And have your appetite ruined for the wedding cake? I should think not!" Hilda said, hoping the promise of Quina's cooking would entice her to

abandon such thoughts as shoving pure sugar down her throat.

It worked, slightly, and Eiko's eyes lit up at the thought of what the cake must certainly look like. She took her mother's hand, and they set off to follow behind Regent Cid... right up until Eiko spotted a flash of red hair on a giant man, and she wriggled out of Hilda's hand to zoom into the crowd. "Amarant!" she shrieked for the second time that day. The wanderer let out a belabored sigh just in time for her to ram, full force, into his leg, and she hopped onto his foot, anchoring him to the ground and forcing him to walk a little slower, with her hanging on. "It's been so long! How are you doing!?"

"Worse, now that you're here," the monk muttered. He winced when she pinched his leg in anger, and he looked back down at her. "Can't you walk?"

Eiko squeezed his leg harder. "Yeah, but you need to exercise more, right? I bet you're not working out as much as when we used to train together!"

"I work out enough," Amarant replied, "If you stay on only one leg, then they won't both get the

same amount of exercise. One will have more muscles than the other—” The monk nearly tripped forward as Eiko reached out and grabbed his other leg, switching to the other.

Amarant let out another sigh, but it was at that time that Hilda caught up to them. “Oh, Eiko! Get off of your friend this instant! I’m sorry, Sir, she is just so excited for the wedding, you see.”

“I’m used to it,” Amarant said flatly, noting that while Hilda had recognized him as part of Eiko’s friend-circle, she hadn’t actually remembered his name, “You’re obviously feeding her well. She’s a lot heavier now than before.”

“Why you little!!” Eiko tried to hit her friend’s leg, but the time she took to wind up her fist gave him enough time to shake her off, and she tripped over her dress, falling on her rear. Hilda groaned that her daughter was getting her pristine clothes dirty.... It was going to happen anyway, but the hope that it wouldn’t happen *this time* was never far from her mind. “I’m not heavier! You never talk about a lady that way!”

“Dear, it’s been more than two years,” Hilda said, helping her daughter up and wiping away the dirt with a kerchief, “You’ve grown. You’ll get taller and

therefore a little heavier. Please don't let him get to you like that; you must be unflappable in the face of those who would enrage you if you wish to follow in your father's footsteps."

Eiko pouted, and Amarant continued as if he hadn't been bothered. "Hey!" the princess shouted, surging back to yell at him. Luckily, the crowds began giving them a wide berth after the scene they were making. "I'm not finished with you...!"

The Steiner family were told ahead of time by General Jasmine that, due to Beatrix's status and the amount of dignitaries from several countries, they were unable to spend time at the ceremonies, but they wanted to spend some time outside anyway. Beatrix had placed Maximilian in a sling around her shoulder, where he rested as if in a hammock, and the two Steiner Siblings were looking for trinkets to remember the occasion. "We can't just buy whatever we want. If Maxie tries to swallow it, he might choke on it if it's too small!"

Adelbert wasn't sure how he was going to baby-proof an entire house, but at least Simone was thinking about it when he was failing to. The three

(well, four) were enjoying time together at the festival, when they heard someone calling out to the father of the household. “Captain! Er, Mr. Steiner, Sir!”

Pluto Knight III, Laudo, was waving the family down with something that looked like a letter clasped in his hand. As he approached, he held out the letter with a smile. “It’s from Master— Er, from Zidane, Sir. He was so sorry that you couldn’t see the ceremony, and—”

“Awww, he was thinking of his bestest best friend!” Simone cooed as she took the letter. She was about to open it right then and there, but Adelbert let out a noise in his throat, and his sister froze as Beatrix hid the smile on her lips. “...Oh, Oh right, sorry Bert! Here you are.”

Adelbert sighed good-naturedly as he tore off the *royal seal* (it was so strange to see something from *Zidane* of all people sending things with royal backing):

Yo, Steiner! Sorry we couldn’t have you and Beatrix in the cathedral. Both Dagger and I were trying to think of ways you would have something that you could see with, and I hired an artist to draw a few sketches of the ceremony. You’ll have it in a

week or so, after all the excitement has calmed down, but that's pretty much the best we could do.

...You of all people deserve to be here to see this, Steiner, but I understand that your family is the most important thing in your life, and things just turned out this way. Maybe at some point, Dagger and I can meet up as Dagger and I, just regular people, and we can celebrate in our own way.

Thanks For Everything, My Friend;

Zidane Tribal

Adelbert's mouth was open as he read the letter, and he felt Beatrix tug on his sleeve when his eyes began misting. "He's still thinking of us," he explained, handing the letter off. "Thank you for the delivery, Laudo....Er... Pluto Knight III."

"You needn't have to give me any respect, or more respect than before, Sir!" Laudo insisted with a smile. "I... I'm just happy you were able to find your happiness."

Adelbert opened his mouth, but closed it thoughtfully as Simone slunk around him to look at the letter over Beatrix's shoulder. "How about you, Laudo?...You were thinking of quitting to be a writer....What do you think?"

Laudo blinked, unsure. He thought to himself and smiled. “Things have been... a little nicer now. Captain Blutzen is a little more lenient, and things are peaceful. Alexandria needs to be rebuilt, and it’s still not finished....I think... I think I’m needed here, now....Besides...” His eyes shone as he bristled with excited energy. “...I feel like all the stuff going on now is going to make for some *really* good material, both fiction and non!”

Well, that wasn’t a bad idea, to be quite frank. Adelbert nodded as Maximilian fussed in his sling. “Thank you again, Laudo, and have a good time at the wedding.”

“Will do, Sir!” Pluto Knight III said with a salute before he bounded off into the crowds. The Steiner family turned to each other, and Simone took the letter as Beatrix began feeding her son...

...Just seeing the way things were now, they knew that everything would be fine as time went on...

The Grand Cathedral was surrounded by crowds of Alexandrians, as well as a few Burmecians and Lindblumians, but the interior of the cathedral was

closed off to anyone but those requested by the bride and groom. As a result, many of the original adventurers who traveled with Zidane and Garnet during those times, as well as Tantalus, and royals from all of the four main countries, were filing into the nave.

Two of the many children Vivi managed to have, whose names were Gigi and Cici, were enjoying some time being mischievous, and had snuck their way in the confusion into some of the side rooms, where statues to Odin, Alexander, and the saints that did great things in their names resided. “Gigi...!” Little Cici, a little less adventurous than her brother, muttered as she tugged on his robes, “What are we looking for, anyway?”

“Something amazing!” Gigi said resolutely, jumping up so he could look over a rather tall table, and, deeming it boring, moved on to the next room. “Maybe we could take something back for Bobby Corwen and the others...!”

“I dunno, what if we get caught?”

“Of course we won’t, not if we’re quiet,” Gigi insisted, opening the door and walking straight into a bushy bearded man with a huge nose.

Cici covered her eyes and squeaked as Doctor Tot adjusted his glasses and looked at the petrified child; the good doctor was so short that he was nearly the same height as the little black mage, which made for a comical sight as the boy cowered before the man. “Oh my!” Doctor Tot proclaimed jovially, ‘What a sweet young boy, how do you do, young man?’ He looked up and peered through his glasses before he spied the little girl quivering in the middle of the room, and his whiskers upturned in a smile, “Is that your sibling? Why don’t you introduce yourselves? My name is Doctor Tot, advisor to Queen Garnet.”

“The queen!?” Gigi cried. “I didn’t mean to come back here! I just. I just wanted to. We were lost! That’s it. We were looking for the.. uh...”

Doctor Tot chuckled softly and shook his head. “There’s no need for apologies. We have all been young before. Come now, let’s go find the way back. You can find your seat; the ceremony is almost starting...”

Gigi and Cici looked at each other, and Cici’s eyes shone even brighter than before at the prospect. “I can’t wait to see Queen Garnet’s pretty dress!”

Gigi groaned. “Of course that’s what *you’d* be thinking of...”

“Yo, Tot, can you make sure I got this tie right?” Another voice asked as a man walked into view, and the children’s eyes widened at Zidane’s outfit. He was dressed from head to toe in a white tuxedo, with tails that wrapped around his waist so tightly that they resembled a robe. They even reached the floor, and looked tailored specifically to reach the floor without touching it. At that moment, he was fiddling with his cravat, which had such an intricate tie that even he was beginning to get frustrated. “I uh... I might have gotten it untied after the dressers finished with it.”

Doctor Tot looked to the black mage children and raised a finger conspiratorially to his lips. “I told you, we have all been young before.” Even adults could still act like children, after all. He then turned and led Zidane to a chair so the shorter man could get at the cravat.

“Zidane!” Gigi cried, crawling onto the bench next to the Genome, “It’s been so long! How are you?”

Cici chimed in, “Are you excited?”

“I bet you are! You get to be a king!”

“I remember Papa talked about you a lot. He said you love Queen Garnet a lot.”

“He said that you loved him too, and he loved you so much!”

“I hope I can love someone like that. How do you know when you’re in love?”

“Oh no, oh no!” Zidane laughed. He tried to shake his head, but Doctor Tot lifted a hand and touched his chin to remind him to remain still, and the man froze. ‘Let’s see, one at a time,’ he said, still stock-still, “I’m doing fine, but I’m more nervous than excited. Don’t want to mess up everything, after all. I won’t be a king though. I’m just the Prince-consort. Kings are Burmecia’s thing.”

...He slowed down when his thoughts turned to Vivi. “Did he say that? That I love Dagger?...I’m glad. He definitely knew before even I did, I think. Your dad was pretty perceptive about those things; always thinking about this and that... Yeah... I loved everyone, in different ways. Vivi was... was my best friend, he helped me see so much more than I would ever be able to on my own...”

...How do you know when you’re in love, though? Zidane shifted his eyes to look at Cici’s

bright, shining ones. “It comes to you when you least expect it. At first I just wanted to help people. I wanted to help your dad because he seemed so sad. Soon I realized that he was helping me too. I wanted to protect him, and he protected me. One day, I was looking at him, and I realized it was like looking at my brothers in Tantalus. That’s when I knew.”

Cici stared before looking at Gigi. “Love is like looking at your *brother*? That can’t be right! You don’t love your brothers!”

“That’s right. Sisters are gross! That’s not love! That’s... stuff you *gotta* do!”

“Alright, Zidane, we’re finished. Come now, the ceremony is almost ready; we need to get these kids to their seats or they’ll miss Queen Garnet’s entrance.”

“Oh, right.” The genome smiled at the children as Gigi hopped off of the bench and gathered around Doctor Tot like little chicks around a hen. “I’ll see you guys at the reception, alright?...Wish me luck.”

“Good luck!” Gigi cheered.

“You can do it, Zidane! Even if you mess up, I know Queen Garnet loves you for you!”

...That was almost annoying how much she didn't trust him to do it right, but she was right. There was no need to be worried because the only person he needed to care about was how Garnet felt about him, and he already knew that her feelings would never change. "Thanks you two. Go sit down, and I'll see you again."

Doctor Tot took the children back to the nave, and Zidane took a deep breath. He was so nervous he nearly fiddled with his cravat and ruined it again. "Alright Zidane, you got this....It's time to see Dagger in that super hot dress, say 'I do', and let everyone congratulate the two of us, and then we can have some time to ourselves, and it's *over*. You got this. You got this."

The Genome let out one more sigh, and began to move to his assigned place.

Queen Garnet trembled with anticipation as she stood at the altar next to the bird-man bishop, who was beginning the introduction, speaking more to the crowd than to the queen. Her mother and her father, the royal parents who weren't her real parents, once did this exact same ritual so long ago.

Thinking back, it wouldn't be a stretch to assume her real birth parents did something similar.... Perhaps she would ask Eiko what the marriage customs of Madain Sari were like...

She had learned from Zidane while traveling that tradition wasn't everything, but there were still parts that made her realize she was part of a bigger whole, and that was a comfort for her. Someday, her own child would be a part of this as well; a part of this culture and people. To know that she and Zidane... would always be tied to the people they loved... forever.

The music began, and she turned a little too quickly to see Zidane. He looked absolutely delightful, all scrubbed up. He never liked baths, so she could imagine that he didn't have that much fun getting prepared for this... but she would tell him later that he looked *scrumptious* right now. Maybe that would convince him to spruce himself up a little more often.

The two locked eyes, and Zidane nearly missed his cue to move, more intent on taking Garnet in than doing the royal marriage ritual. He did move, however, moreso to get to her side than anything else. She extended her hands, as per tradition, and

Zidane's arms reached out to take her hands. They clasped as if they had been made for each other, and it took Garnet every bit of her willpower to not embrace him then and there. The two looked at each other, drowning in each others' eyes for a moment. It wasn't until the bishop coughed and Zidane remembered to shift to the side and stand at the right location.

Garnet had a sudden interest in how those in the audience were reacting, but when she saw Zidane's beautiful blue eyes, and the way they were staring into hers, she stopped and stared back. She was awash with his love, and she could *feel* the gods themselves looking down upon their union. She had trouble communicating with the Eidolons without her horn, but here, now, she could feel them as well as when she came into contact with Eiko and summoned Alexander those few years ago. She wondered if Zidane could feel them too; from the way he twitched under her gaze, she assumed he could. It must have been the strangest feeling for someone who wasn't used to it.

“And now I ask the two of you. Your Majesty, Queen Garnet til Alexandros XVII. Do you swear, in the eyes of the gods, of our guardian deity Alexander, and of the people in attendance, that you

swear to love and care for Zidane Tribal as your consort, as long as you live together in life?”

Garnet turned to listen to the bishop, only out of respect for him and the ceremony, for she wanted nothing more than to look back and stare into Zidane’s eyes. “I do!”

“And do you, Zidane Tribal, swear in the eyes of the gods, of our guardian deity Alexander, and of the people in attendance, that you swear to love and care for Queen Garnet til Alexandros XVII, and to be in subservient reverence before her as her consort, as long as you live together in life?”

Zidane fidgeted mightily under the bishop’s eagle gaze, partially because he just wanted to get it over with, and Garnet began smiling as he bounced on his feet and nodded fervently, still staring at the queen. “I do, I do!” he cried, sounding a little immature, but extremely cute.

“Then by the power vested in me by our Father Odin and our Guardian Alexander, I now pronounce you husband and wife.” The bishop closed the scriptural book and turned to Zidane, who barely noticed who was in the room with him. “You may now kiss the groom.”

According to Alexandrian customs, the bride, being the head of the household, was to make the first act as head and seal their contract with a kiss, but Zidane was always known to buck trends, and he had been so good about everything else. He should be allowed to ignore this *one* tradition, she thought as he grabbed her face before she could even register that the bishop had finished. His lips were on hers and she immediately wrapped her arms around his shoulders, drawing him further in. His hands moved to wrap his arms behind her back and lean her down low so he could bend over her, and Tantalus whooped and hollered even as Hilda reached over to cover Eiko's eyes.

When he drew Garnet back up, the queen spent a moment to reorient herself, and she shook her head. "Oh... oh *my*, Zidane. Warn me next time!"

He placed another, much more chaste kiss, on her lips, and he smirked, "I'll try, but no promises."

"You scamp...! Come here," And she reached up to give him a kiss of her own, and she took his hand before turning to the audience. "My friends! Thank you for being witnesses to this occasion! Please continue to watch over us as we continue our marriage!"

Marcus's voice could be heard from the crowd: "I didn't know you were into people watching you!" which was promptly followed by a pained howl as Blank gave him a kidney shot in annoyance.

Garnet couldn't help but laugh, and she turned to Zidane again, showing him that she loved the chaotic energy his family gave to hers. She squeezed his hand and said, "Let's go, my consort, my prince, my husband, my love."

"...Please tell me you're not going to use *every* title every time you refer to me."

"...I dunno, if you hate it that much, I think I should." Garnet's smile was so bright that Zidane couldn't help but pick her up in his arms and carry her out of the cathedral with a huff. She let out a delighted squeal as he opened the door to the cathedral and caused the people to scream in delight upon seeing their queen and her new prince-consort.

...*Oh yes, Queen Garnet til Alexandros XVII thought to herself, This can work. This will definitely work.*

The entire Alexandrian castle was abuzz with delight as everyone prepared for Princess Sarah's fifth birthday. The little girl's horn dazzled in the sunlight as she ran up and down the hallways, screeching like a banshee while Elizabeth scrambled after her. "You little snot, you'd better come back here this instant! You need a bath before the party and by Ifrit you are *getting one!*"

"You gotta catch me first!" Sarah squealed, clambering up the steps two at a time before turning around and sticking her tongue out at her second cousin, "You can't catch me, you can't—EYYAHHH!"

"Forgive me, your highness!" Pluto Knight IX, Ryan, said apologetically as the child squirmed in his hands, "But your mother *did* say that you should be washed up before the party!"

"I don't wanna!" Sarah whined as Elizabeth, gasping for air, struggled up the last two stairs to take the princess from the Pluto Knight, "And you can't make me!"

"Oh, Lady Elizabeth!" Ryan proclaimed, saluting the lady-in-waiting as she struggled with her second cousin, "I have a few messages for you. Lord King

is still preparing up in his room, but he should be down shortly.”

“Yeah yeah, whatever,” Elizabeth muttered, clearly not interested in her brother’s daily goings-on.

“The other message is from Lady Simone! She says that she’ll be arriving with her nephew shortly!”

Elizabeth screeched, “Why didn’t you say so sooner!?” She jammed the princess under her arm like a football (and Sarah squealed happily) and the woman dashed off to the baths. “I swear to all that is holy, if you make me late for my own meeting with Simone, you little pustule, I will make it look like an accident!”

“Faster, faster!” the princess crowed happily, her tail swishing in excitement, as Elizabeth dashed off.

Victor was walking down the hallway as Elizabeth rushed by, nearly bowling him over, and when he found Ryan, he raised a hand in greeting. “*Ryan, good to see you.*”

“*Likewise, Victor!*” Ryan waved the other man down, and they went to walking together. ‘It’s been a while, huh? How are things in Treno?’ Victor

signed in reply. “Good, good. I heard Lord King is looking for a ‘significant other’, if you know what I mean. Does he have his eye on anyone in particular?” More signing. “Huh, really? They’d have cute kids if it works out between them...”

As the two passed by the kitchen, they heard the rumbling of a charging Qu, and Ryan immediately dashed behind King’s bodyguard, trembling lightly as Quina huffed. “Always scared! Qus eat chickens! Bah, Victor. Want to make good food for King. What King favorite food?”

Victor stared at Quina before signing the answer, and the Qu nodded sagely. “Ah! Hedgehog Pie Soup! Good choice! Taste like pumpkin!” They then turned around and bounded back into the kitchen, gone so fast that they were already gone the moment the two guards realized that Quina understood sign language.

Princess Eiko, now finally a teenager herself, had grown like a weed and was beginning to get her first bouts of acne, something that made her extremely annoyed at. Luckily, it wasn’t as bad as Scott’s and Gordon’s acne, and at least her voice wasn’t

scratchy like Gordon's was (Scott's voice dropped fine, of course, as everything he did seemed to be done perfectly), so she spent far too much time touching up her face in her room before leaving to help "Aunt Garnet" with the preparations. She has quickly become Sarah's honorary cousin, which meant that Garnet was just as much an aunt as she was a sister, which was a little hard to remember which title was which around which person. "Dagger! How are you doing? Anything I can help with?"

"Eiko, aren't you looking amazing today?" Garnet replied, reaching out to place a fake kiss on her temple, so she didn't muss up the princess's makeup, "I think we're mostly ready. Zidane nearly has the banners finished up above. Zidane! Please use a ladder! Scrambling on the roofs is one thing, but there aren't as many things to cling to inside. Besides, you're setting a bad example for Sarah!"

"She's got a tail, she's fine," Zidane called from the rafters as he nailed the final banner in place. "If she doesn't learn how to balance with it now, she never will."

"Please remind me how many bones you broke learning how to balance with *your* tail growing up,

Dear?”

“She’s already muttering the incantation for Cure. Don’t know when she’ll master it for real, but it’ll be soon enough.”

“Uhm... I’m sorry, excuse me...?” A demure tone from a decidedly not-usually-so-demure person called out, “I’m sorry, I’m here, Simone Steiner? Are we early?”

Eiko whirled around. “Is Maxie here already!?” she called out as Simone Steiner walked into the main hall with Maximilian Steiner, still five but halfway to six, holding her hand while sucking his other hand’s thumb. He was dressed in as fine a garb as he could be, for his father wished to make sure that he looked the part for a royal birthday, and Beatrix had spend nearly a half hour to keep him in place long enough to brush out his wild, curly black hair and keep it restrained.

The moment Lindblum’s princess came charging forward, however, the child shouted and covered his face with his arms as he was peppered with faint kisses all over his hair, mussing up all of his mother’s hard work. “Look at how tall you’ve grown! Oh, you’re so handsome! I wonder if Adelbert was this handsome when he was young!”

“He really was,” Simone agreed.

“Auntiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii,” Maximilian whined as Eiko turned him around and hugged him so hard she picked him straight up off the floor, “I’m not handsome!”

“You’re pretty handsome,” Simone said with a shrug.

“Nooooooo! I’m cool!” he insisted, flailing his limbs in a way that only made him cute. Simone and Eiko looked at each other and *cooed*. “Ughhhh, I’m never going to be a cool vigilante of justice at this rate!”

“Where did you even learn what that means?” Eiko muttered, plopping the kid on the floor.

“From Eddie!” Maximilian said brightly, smiling wide and showing all the baby teeth he had been losing along the way. “Mom goes down to Zamo Basin with me sometimes, and I can see Uncle Amarant and Eddie and play with them!” Eiko nodded, remembering something about Amarant picking up some weird stray kid in the small forest village. There was some big story that happened with Zidane, Amarant, and Lady Beatrix, but she really didn’t know a lot of the details.

“Simmie!” Everyone in the room, from Queen Garnet, Prince-Consort Zidane and Eiko, to Maximilian and Simone, looked up to see Elizabeth panting over the railing on the second floor. She waved lightly and took a gulp of air. “Been a while! I missed you!” Princess Sarah was next to her, dressed in a beautiful, but sensible, dress that wouldn’t be missed if she scuffed it up, and her hair was dried and done up beautifully enough that it could only have been Elizabeth’s perfect cosmetology.

“Ohhh, Beth, I missed you too!” Simone called as she hitched up her dress and jogged up the stairs. She had to sidestep Princess Sarah to give Elizabeth a hug, and the two swept each other off of their feet as they embraced, “How has Treno been?”

“Ugh, fine enough, but—” The two caught up as Sarah, deeming the two boring, trotted down the stairs to hug her mother’s dress and look over at Eiko, who had left Maximilian to go see her cousin. She sat down on her legs and pulled out a box:

“Hey there Sarah! Happy Birthday! Here’s a gift from one Summoner to another.” She opened the box and showed off a necklace with a deep ruby set as the pendant. “We don’t know who’ll call to you

until you're older, but you never know, right? And red really suits you, I think! Here, lemme turn you around and put it on."

"Isn't it beautiful?" Garnet asked as she helped lift Sarah's black hair up so Eiko could attach the chain easier. "Please take care of it, and what do you say to Cousin Eiko?"

"Thank you, Cousin Eiko!" Sarah said, turning back around and inspecting the gemstone with interest. Although soon she looked behind Lindblum's princess to glance at Maximilian, who was quickly looking bored and unsure what to do. So Princess Sarah walked straight up to him and took his hand. "Come on, Max, let's go play."

"Can we play Monsters and Mercenaries?"

"Okay! I'm the mercenary!" Sarah said, releasing her friend and charging off outside.

"No fair! Can't you be the monster for once!?" Maximilian whined, jogging after her.

Zidane dropped from the rafters with barely a sound, and he reached out to take Garnet's waist and pull her close. "You know..." the Genome began, "I used to think, a while back, that maybe I wasn't doing enough as a dad. That maybe I could be doing

more. But then I see her playing, and enjoying life, and I think to myself... That's it. That's all I want for her."

Garnet placed a hand on her husband's one, and she cooed with delight at the playful laughter of her daughter. After all of their ups and downs, to see this peaceful moment, and to know that they had more life to live, and that their children, and their children's children, would continue the song of the planet... that made everything worth living. "Oh Zidane, I do believe you're right."

"Of course," Eiko said, crossing her arms matter-of-factly. "Zidane's *always* right about everything."

Fin

28. Story Ideas

The first one starts with Amarant living in Zamo Basin, where a lot of the poor Trenoians went to live and work. There he meets a kid named Eddie, who is angry that Amarant doesn't just beat up all the rich people and give everyone their money, and thinks that he's been brainwashed by Queen Garnet. Eddie runs in with a Red Wizard named Hein, who has come to study the forest now that it's not so evil anymore.

But it's still kinda evil. People keep having visions of fairies asking for help and begging for them to find "The Sorceress". People who go into the forest start getting eaten by monsters and dryads and stuff, so the Cleyran Geomancer named Rayne tries to help Geomance, a Black Mage who has been trying to collect the last vestiges of Mist tries to help, well, collect Mist, and Alexandria calls on Beatrix and Zidane to help out as well.

Anyway Hein is helping Eddie out by teaching the kid all sorts of magic, and Eddie takes to it like a duck to water, mysteriously. Hein considers maybe using the power of the forest as a conduit to gain

more power and maybe even beat up *all* the bad rich people and become Robin Hood. Eddie's like "Hell yeah" and joins up with him, but WHOOPS turns out Eddie is the mysterious Sorceress the fairies were looking for. The Great Tree of the Forest needed a protector of the forest and called out to a woman who can care for the trees, and Eddie, also known as *Edea*, was chosen this whole time! Hein figured out who she was and forces her to fuse with the tree so she can gain all the power at once, which fries her brain and makes her go insane, but it's okay because now she's stuck in the tree and can't leave (...wait). Her powers go haywire and Hein is able to start absorbing all of her magic, becoming the new conduit for the forest's strength, and the fairies start crying and yelling in everyone's dreams to come help.

Amarant, who was getting closer to Eddie because he accidentally adopts all the kids like some sort of tsundere, starts putting two and two together, and follows the fairies into the forest, with Rayne, The Black Mage (He probably would have had a name like No. 329 or something so he's just The Black Mage now), Zidane and Beatrix go into the forest with him, and the fairies lead them to the Great Tree, which is getting all of its power

absorbed by Hein, who is now getting godlike in his power.

Hein does his evil villain monologue about why he is so smart and has all the power, and Zidane, Beatrix and the Black Mage try to fight but get thoroughly defeated by the intense power of *an entire forest*. Rayne is able to use her Geomantic powers, combined with her Cleyran Dancing (Zidane makes a “GeoDANCER” joke at some point and no one thinks it’s funny) to fight back with her own spells, fighting fire with fire, as it were. Speaking of fire, Hein starts losing control of the power he has, and he catches his body on fire. He immediately is set ablaze, but manages to survive through the pure power of the magical essence he absorbed, and now he’s just a skeleton with a jaunty hat (FF3’s Hein is still the coolest looking boss in like all of Final Fantasy, Fite Me).

Anyway it is quickly looking like there’s no way to win, but Amarant reaches out to Edea, and asks her to realize that power doesn’t come from just fighting and winning, but to realize that friends, love and companionship are what truly make you strong. It was something he had to learn as well, and it can be difficult to achieve when you’ve been hurt and alone for so long, but he believes that Edea can get

through it. She remembers all the time she spent learning from Amarant, and realizes she loves him as a father/mentor figure. Coming to that realization helps her realize that the power of the earth and the creatures on it is a similar relationship, one that is maternal, which is why a Sorceress is needed to protect the forest. She manages to take control of her power, separate herself from the Great Tree, and disintegrate Hein by taking back the power he had stolen from her.

Everyone is happy, Zamo Basin continues to be helpful in logging and forest regrowth, and Eddie continues to learn under Amarant, growing to be a much more well adjusted youth. THE END.

The other story I wanted to make was about Eiko. She'd be about 14-15 at this point, and she starts speaking with Madeen again like she was considering with Zidane, and the two talk about the previous Summoner that Madeen had known a long time ago. He was a White Wizard named Minwu, who had once lived in the Kashuan area. When the Summoners were sealing away Alexander and Leviathan, Minwu had discovered the greatest spell, Ultima, and realized it was too powerful. He

sacrificed his life force to seal it away forever, but Madeen mentions that Kuja had used it during the final battle with him. This could mean that Kuja had broken the seal that Minwu placed on Ultima, but could not master its use unless he was Tranced.

Eiko is naturally worried, and as the final Summoner, feels it's her duty to do whatever it takes to seal Ultima away again. She remembers that Minwu died to do this, and thinks that it might actually come to that as well. She covers her attempt to leave by saying she's just visiting the Black Mage Village, but Scott and Gordon notice her acting weird and stow away on her Hilda Garde when she leaves.

Scott is antagonistic towards Eiko, telling her to act as her station demands, return home, and be a royal, but Eiko cannot return because she wants to save the world. The problem is that if she announces that she's going to save the world, she'd have to explain that she might sacrifice herself to seal Ultima away, and doesn't want her cousins to worry.

They arrive at the Black Mage Village, and Scott still remembers the horrible things they did to his father (probably with a bunch of horrifying, traumatizing flashbacks woopwoop). He refuses to

let Gordon near them, even though his little brother warms up to them because Eiko asks him to try.

Suddenly, there is a disturbance in the force. The Iifa Tree's Soulcage has managed to absorb enough Mist to start reviving, and because it has absorbed so many souls, it gains enough sentience to attempt to separate itself from the tree itself. Calling itself Exdeath, as it leaves on its Exodus from the Tree (Get it because Exdeath and Exodus are spelled the same in Japanese hohoho it's a JOKE), he starts seeking out the last remaining bits of Mist on the planet, believing the Mist to belong only to him so he can absorb them all. After that, he will absorb all the souls of the planet, turning Gaia into a lifeless husk.

Exdeath arrives at the Black Mage Village, which is the largest concentration of Mist Souls, and he starts trying to eat everything. Gordon wants to run, so Eiko orders him to help evacuate the people, and she runs off to engage with Exdeath. His powers over death are incredible, however, and his Black Magic vs her White Magic leads to a stalemate.

Scott arrives and deals a powerful blow with his magic sword, The Wild Rose, and Exdeath is incensed. He punches a hole through Scott's chest

and leaves to go find a way to restore his health, and Eiko attempts to heal Scott. Unfortunately, Exdeath's power over souls has made Scott's body reject healing, for Exdeath has claimed his soul. Scott, on death's door, finally admits that he was jealous of Gordon all along, for Gordon is left-handed, and thus is able to become a Dragoon like the Burmecians. Gordon can be the true heir of Kashuan, and Scott is now nothing, for he wouldn't even be Regent of Lindblum.

He also admits that he had been pushing Eiko to understand her role more because that's the only way he felt he could be useful to anyone, and the more they had been together, the more he had grown to love her (as a woman or as a family member? YOU DECIDE). He begs Eiko to take care of Gordon just before he dies. Gordon returns to see Scott just as he dies, and he becomes inconsolable. He doesn't believe that they can defeat Exdeath, because he's not as strong as Scott, and if Scott couldn't win, how could Gordon try to help?

Eiko doesn't care; she went into this accepting she might die, and goes to Mikoto, asking her to do what she can to reach Zidane and the others. She needs to go find Exdeath now, before he can recover and make Scott's sacrifice in vain, but Mikoto can

do what she can to get help in case Eiko perishes. She then asks if Gordon wants to come with her, and Gordon, trembling, decides to do what he can to take revenge for his brother.

The two go on the Hilda Garde and wonder where a bunch of magic could be. Eiko realizes that maybe Kuja's Desert Palace might have been built because it's filled with magic that he could absorb, and might actually have been the original location where Ultima was sealed. Exdeath may try to absorb the magic and recover, so they decide to go to the Desert Palace. While they are flying, someone lands on the airship: It's Freya and Fratley, who had been wondering where Gordon went off to because he was missing all of his Dragoon Lessons.

The group explain what's been going on, and Freya and Fratley agree to help. Fratley begs Freya to hang back "For their kids", but Freya understands there won't *be* a world for their kids if they just hang back. The two then give Gordon one last crash course on Dragooning, and Gordon, with Gungnir in hand, finally manages to do a real Dragoon Jump. His confidence has finally come to him, but Gordon insists it's because of Scott egging him on from the afterlife.

Anyway, the group goes to engage with Exdeath, and Exdeath is like “Mwahahaha, I’m going to eat all the mist, and then I’m going to eat all the living souls, and then I’m going to find the crystal and eat the souls that haven’t even been born yet, and then I’ll reduce everything to the void mwahahaha!”

But then he gets his butt kicked. I don’t really know how, because most of my notes focused on Eiko’s relationship with her cousins, but it was probably really cool and filled with people being badasses. Then Exdeath dies, and Eiko finds the seal on Ultima, which Exdeath was planning on using. She is about to sacrifice herself, but Minwu’s soul appears, and all of Exdeath’s souls which are now free work together to help give her the strength to seal the spell away without killing her in the process. Madeen helps too of course.

Then the group floods the Desert Palace with sand so no one can access it ever again (don’t ask “what if people start archeologizing”, that’s not until another 1000 years at least!) and everyone goes home. They bring Scott’s body back to Kashuan and bury him as a great Kashuan prince, thus allowing his soul to be recognized as a Kashuan like he always wanted. Eiko and Gordon finally see eye-to-eye and promise to help each other build up

Lindblum and Kashuan (As lovers 10 years down the line? PROBABLY NOT BUT GOTTA REFERENCE FF2's GORDON AND HILDA SOMEHOW.) THE END X2

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